

# THE IMP

WILSON MACNAIR



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**THE IMP**



# THE IMP

BY

WILSON MACNAIR

AUTHOR OF 'GLASS HOUSES,'

'BLOOD AND IRON'

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296

HODDER AND STOUGHTON

LONDON NEW YORK TORONTO



TO  
THE THREE B'S

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The sincere thanks and  
acknowledgments of the Author  
are due to his friend  
J. E. H. W.

# BOOK I





## CHAPTER I

### THE HURRICANE

THE event startled the whole countryside. Tourn-tourq was only sixteen it is true, and Esmé Hillier was only ten. But even at ten it is possible to do things which are quite unpardonable. And insulting a Highland laird in his own village, and in face of his own people, is one of these unpardonable things. Not even Esmé Hillier's blue eyes, nor her wistful lips, nor her flaming mop of red-gold hair could earn her indulgence. Her little hands had profaned ; and there was an end of it.

It happened this way. Esmé's father was an officer in the army, a man of the old school, with Scots blood in him. He had come to Tourntourq village to spend a short furlough from India because he had friends in the neighbourhood, and because, but the point is not to be laboured, those friends had grouse moors. He took a house in the village, and brought his wife and daughter with him. When he went shooting Esmé went paddling ; her mother sometimes accompanied her, but not often. Her mother was one of those wives who are in process of retiring from active married life into a nursing home.

So Esmé mostly went paddling alone, and she was mostly very well able to take care of herself. Her short, well-bred nose told you that, and so did the funny little sideways tilt of her shoulders when she walked. You felt that it was quite possible that she had got that tilt of her shoulders from the thoughts her mother cherished before she was born.

Because the tilt conveyed all sorts of queer, indefinite things, defiance that might be quite pitiful even, and 'I'm-a-failure-but-I-don't-care,' and a kind of slipping away sideways out of the troubles of life that made you want to put out your arms to help. Not that you would have caught Esmé if you had put out your arms. . . .

Esmé's nurse understood these matters, and that was why they were friends. Not to understand Esmé was uncomfortable for anybody; it would have been very uncomfortable for her nurse. Understanding, however, was very comfortable, because the child had stores of kindness. Her nurse and she were a holy alliance against the right thinking of her father and the sufferings of her 'poor dear Mummy.'

A little while after they came to Tourntourq her mother's sufferings redoubled their usual energy, and she was locked away beside a nurse with the local doctor going in and out twice a day, and her father looking as worried as he could, and the rest of it. She shrugged her small shoulders and told 'Nana' she was afraid 'Mummy must be an awful bother to Daddy,' adding the information:

'If I had been Daddy I'd have got Mummy mended properly before I married her.'

Nana said that her mother had been quite soundly mended when she was married.

'Then,' Esmé declared, 'Daddy must have broken her himself. Hm!'

That new idea kept her busy for the rest of the afternoon. At tea-time she asked very solemnly:

'Shall I get broken when I'm married, do you think?'

Nana did not reply for a moment and Esmé added:

'Why did you not get married, Nana? Was it because you were afraid you might get broken?'

'Yes,' said Nana slowly; 'I think perhaps that was it.'



They sat silent together ; Esmé's eyes were full of the wisdom of childhood and the wisdom of womanhood, which are so nearly the same wisdom. At last she declared :

' If a man broke me I'd kill him. There, I would.'

She clenched her fists ; her mop of hair glowed and flamed as the sunset-light rushed in it. Her strong little teeth were clenched.

The next day she met the doctor outside the door, and defied him silently. The doctor was an enemy, both because he ordered drugs to be swallowed—she had a superstitious fear and loathing of drugs and poultices and plasters which were nasty and hurt—and because he had a hand in what was going on ; his blandishments were not potent against her clear gaze that saw him a hired conspirator. Yet the man must tempt this awful Providence of a child's understanding with his patter . . . the kind of talk that is reckoned in small fees. He stopped right in front of Esmé with the big, outstretched *abandon* of his kind. He said :

' Hullo, my little sweetheart. . . . Going to pass me without saying " Good-morning ? " I say ! '

' I'm not your sweetheart,' said Esmé, and there was a thrill of excitement in her voice.

' Come, come,' said the doctor, ' that won't do on a bonny bright morning like this.'

' It will do. It will have to do.'

Esmé tried to edge past the doctor. She had a little sand-pail in her hand, and she rattled it at him. The doctor put out his hands and caught her. He swung her off her feet and lifted her up with a great hollow guffaw which said :

' Thus shall be done unto every woman that defieth a man.'

Her eyes went cold, like steel. The doctor set her down again and turned to go up the pathway to

the house. Long before the door was opened to him he had forgotten all about Esmé. He was trying to remember about Esmé's mother. What was it he had ordered her to do, to eat, to drink? Dr. MacGregor was a capable enough man at his work, but his memory was short. Women like Esmé's mother shortened it. He had no patience with them at all. Nevertheless he entered the sick-room with his big red face set in the most ridiculous expression. His face expressed pain and anxiety and sympathy—what Dr. MacGregor conceived to be sympathy. His words, too, were measured: he seemed to speak in half-crowns.

So his first thought on coming into the room—that is, his first thought after the thought of how soon he might be able decently to leave it—was that a new subject of conversation must be found, and quickly.

Then he remembered Esmé.

He told Mrs. Hillier about his little tussle with Esmé, and said that Esmé had quite 'stolen his heart' with her independence and her wonderful eyes and hair.

'Esmé is a great anxiety,' Mrs. Hillier said in a voice that seemed to have fought its way out of her body against strong opposition. 'She is so wilful . . . so . . .'

Mrs. Hillier's voice was worsted in the unequal struggle. She gave a wan sigh. Dr. MacGregor acted without a moment's hesitation. He pinned the subject of Esmé to the wall, so to speak . . . that being so much more agreeable than the subject of Esmé's mother's inside. He said:

'My dear Mrs. Hillier, she is going to be a beauty . . . a great beauty. That hair . . . There are dreams and visions in that hair . . .'

He waved his hand; the Celtic blood in him made his voice thrill. His voice had a rich Highland accent when he was enthusiastic. 'Exquisite, wonderful,'

he added, 'oh, believe me. But little Miss Independence will know how to take care of herself.'

'She is most troublesome, poor dear,' Mrs. Hillier said. 'So wild . . . so naughty . . . so noisy . . . and such a dreadful, shocking temper, I think. For a child of her age, her temper is . . . ah, I find talking exhausts me so.'

Mrs. Hillier's head seemed to recede into her pillow, showing her neck, which was thin, and in which the veins pulsated in an unusually active manner. . . .

'I eat nothing, you see,' she added meekly . . . 'a glass of Evian water, a biscuit . . . my blood pressure this morning has fallen again. Such a dreadful sinking feeling too after meals. I thought of trying a glass of sherry, but I was afraid to, as you hadn't ordered it. . . . Besides, there are my kidneys to be considered. What action does sherry have on the kidneys, doctor?'

That finished Esmé as a subject of conversation, and if the child could have seen inside Dr. MacGregor's mind, as he addressed it to the action of sherry on the kidneys, she might perhaps have forgiven him. Not being able to see inside his mind, she was very far indeed from forgiveness. Dr. MacGregor had rattled her, and when she was rattled, the whole world rattled too. She hated the whole world.

She walked along the shore, after Dr. MacGregor set her down, and her eyes were like the sea when there is a storm coming. Her eyes were very still, and they looked calm. She came to a puddle made by the tide, and she walked into the puddle: she stood in it till her feet were wet and her head felt hot. Then she ran. And as she ran she threw away her little sand-pail and didn't stop to see where she had thrown it. She ran very fast until she came to some rocks that were a kind of barrier to the harbour and protected the jetty, which lay just behind them. She sat down on the rocks and rested her small chin



on her hand and gazed . . . and gazed. She felt sick inside . . . a queer sinking feeling because she was still unclean from the doctor's outrage upon her. She wanted to cry and had no tears. The sun made splendid laughter among her hair, but her lips denied him. Her lips and all of her face were pale, with the soft, beseeching pallor of fair girls, that is wistful to astonishment. Once she bit her lips sharply, and often her brown little fists were clenched.

A man and a girl drifted past her in a rowing-boat. They were seated, close together, in the stern of the boat, so that the bow was raised high above the water and acted as a kind of sail. The man had his arm about the girl's waist.

Quite suddenly Esmé noticed that the man had his arm about the girl's waist.

She saw the man bend forward and kiss the girl. . . . She saw the girl's face too ; it had a queer, soft, gentle look which she had never seen before on any woman's face. The boat drifted out of sight towards the jetty.

She stood up and drew her hand across her eyes. Her eyes were quite dry, but her head throbbed—a pitiless throbbing that shot the sunlight with little scarlet streaks of pain ; her head swam. She climbed over the rocks, using her hands to help her. The boat still drifted, but the man had moved away from the girl and now sat with the oars in his hands. The girl's back was towards Esmé, but she could see that the girl was arranging her hair where the man had ruffled it. A shiver, like small needles, went all through her.

The man, but he was only a boy, was watching the girl with a kind of lazy tolerance. He was dressed in white flannels, and his face was towards Esmé. His face, she thought in her hatred of him, was beautiful beyond any face she had ever seen. How was it possible that a man with a face like that



could do what she had seen him do? In her picture-book about the Knights of the Round Table, Geraint, the Knight, had that face, Geraint the Knight who fell in worship before Enid.

She ran across the rocks to the jetty. The boy and girl had just come to the jetty, and the boy jumped out of the boat and gave the girl his hand to help her to alight. A motor-car was standing at the end of the jetty, and when the man in charge of it saw the boy and girl he started the engine and then came running down with their coats. Esmé watched the girl. Her eyes were as old as Eve. The girl took the boy's hand and jumped; she came up the two steps of the jetty at a bound and she laughed, showing splendid teeth. The boy still held her hand, and so she swung away from him and back again. And that made both of them laugh.

He was standing just at the edge of the jetty, above the boat which the boat-hirer was now about to pull back to its moorings. He released the girl's hand, flinging it upwards with a quick motion, as he might have tossed a cricket-ball. She took a step back, pretending to admire his white flannels; the wind caught strands of her hair and blew them across her throat like a golden necklet. She was still laughing. A small crowd of fishermen and women stood at the end of the jetty, respectful, wondering. The motor-man advanced with his coats. . . .

And then, all of a sudden, the hurricane that could not be controlled any more burst its bonds. There was a sharp cry of astonishment from the boy, and a still sharper cry from the girl, and then a great, long splash that came just a second before the angry shoutings of the fisherfolk.

The boy stood right up to his neck in the water just under the jetty steps.

Esmé stood on the jetty, above him. Her fists were clenched. Her eyes burned under her hair. . . .

The next minute the boy was out of the water and standing on the jetty again, with the girl, all breathless, helping to shake the water out of his clothes. The crowd on the jetty surged down, exclaiming ; but the boy waved them back, and they went at his hand. Only the motor-man stayed on the jetty. The boy said :

‘ Give me my coat, Colin. . . . Don’t worry, Dulcie. I ’m all right.’

When the boy’s coat was on he turned to Esmé and saw her small, clenched hands and her eyes. He seemed to be going to say something when the girl cried :

‘ You horrid little thing. I shall tell your mummy, and you will be whipped.’

The boy laughed ; he turned away, and then he turned back again as if something he had seen in Esmé’s face interested him a great deal. He asked :

‘ But why did you push me into the water, kiddie ? ’

Esmé pressed her lips tight together. The thing was too big to be explained. She shook her head. And then, suddenly, she changed her mind. She cried :

‘ I saw you . . . in the boat . . . kissing her . . . and . . . and . . . oh, I can’t bear it ! ’

Esmé cried ; and in much rain the hurricane was spent. The boy looked at Esmé, and his cheeks got red and the girl’s cheeks got red. The boy turned away and went up the jetty, making little pools of water as he stepped. He was princely in his refusal of the offers of dry clothes which the crowd around his motor-car eagerly made him.

As the car drove off he glanced back at the jetty and saw Esmé being retrieved by her nurse. He said :

‘ Funny child ! What wonderful hair she has, though. Hair like that will haunt me. . . . And her eyes. . . . Must be a bit mad . . . ’

The girl said :

‘O Niall, it isn’t that . . . it’s . . . I don’t know.’ She blushed, and her voice thrilled. The boy gazed at her.

‘All women are mad,’ he said positively, ‘all of them.’

Esme’s nurse evidently agreed with the boy, so far, at least, as Esmé was concerned, for she said some very hard things which Esmé bore meekly. Esmé did not seem to be able to dry her tears now.

‘Yes,’ her nurse finished up, ‘you have done an awful thing this time, and no mistake. That’s Tourntourq, the young laird, and he’s the king of this place, and a friend of your Daddy’s, and . . .’

They were passing through the crowd at the top of the jetty which had waited to see them go, and which said things.

Nana set her face.

But Esmé neither heard nor saw.

## CHAPTER II

### IMP

THE steamer was crowded, and Esmé had trouble in making her way through the crowd to get a deck chair. She had more trouble when she tried to pull a chair out of the heap at the end of the promenade deck. The chair stuck. She gave a big tug, and still it stuck. Then a voice behind her said :

‘ Let me help you, please.’

She stood back with a sigh of relief. A man in a kilt, who had been standing near her, reached down and drew the chair clear at a single pull. He turned with the chair in his hands. Esmé gave a little gasp of surprise :

‘ Oh, thank you, so much,’ she said. And then, on a sudden impulse, she put her hand on the man’s arm, which was bent to hold the chair, and cried :

‘ So you have quite forgiven me, Tourntourq ? ’

The man started. Then the bewildered look in his eyes changed suddenly to laughter. He set down the chair and held out his hand.

‘ The child whose hair was like . . . altar fires.’

‘ You mean the little brat who gave you a jolly good ducking,’ said Esmé in practical tones.

‘ That too . . . ’

He found a second chair for himself, and sat down beside her. The steamer had just left Gourock on her daily trip to the West Highlands, and they had the sea and the hills beyond the sea, that have their hands gathering clouds out of the sunlight, spread



all before them. The smell of tar, and the smell of the river and the sea were in their nostrils in this young morning. Tourntourq looked at the girl in silence a few moments as if he was recalling all the moments of that strange incident before he spoke about it. She watched him also and noted, in a quick impression, the fineness of him—the very quality which had stung her so eight years ago—and the faint suggestion of the barbaric his kilt and the eagle's feather in his black bonnet gave him. His eyes, though, were strange looking, she thought. . . . They seemed to have mists right away at the backs of them. At last he said :

‘I have often, very often, wondered what it was that made you do that. These sort of impulses interest me. But I have not been able to understand.’

Esmé laughed gaily :

‘Why,’ she cried, ‘that was the Imp. . . . My Imp . . . oh, it's the wickedest little Imp. If you knew the number of scrapes it's landed me into, and the number of unkind things it has made me do, and the number of real bad times it has given me, you'd be sorry for me. . . .’

She gave her shoulders a queer little sideways tilt. The little tilt said that Esmé would not relinquish her Imp—no, not for all the security in the world.

Tourntourq laughed.

‘Is that all the secret?’ he declared. ‘And I had built a philosophy about it.’

Esmé opened her mouth to say that the Imp needed a philosophy for its elucidation ; but she didn't say it. Something in his eyes stopped her . . . the mist probably. Imps and mist, she thought, did not go very well together. She lay back in her chair and completed her survey of him. Then she closed her eyes. When she opened them again he noticed that there was a look of apprehension, almost but not quite of fear, in them. He was just going to follow

that look when a small child that had been playing near them on the deck, slipped and fell at Esmé's feet, and then rolled towards the scuppers. The child began to scream. Esmé jumped up and caught him, and gathered him into her arms almost before the other people had realised what was wrong. She brought him back to her chair, and looked round for his mother. Tourntourq heard her comforting him with many words. He observed, too, that the child's crying had stopped instantly. When his mother came running along the deck he was already reassured, and did not seem to wish to leave his new friend. But Esmé made friends with his mother almost as quickly as she had made friends with him. He saw them walk up the deck together, and then Esmé bend down and squeeze both the child's hands to say good-bye. She came back to him with the wind blowing little wisps of hair about her cheeks; her eyes had lost their care.

'And that was the Imp again,' he said gently . . .  
'Dear Imp.'

Esmé didn't accept or reject his suggestion. She just laughed. He turned to her with approval in his eyes and asked:

'Now you must tell me . . . what you have been doing with yourself since the great day. The adventures of the Imp must be worth hearing.'

To his surprise that damped the sunlight out of her face again and brought back the weary look. She shrugged her shoulders:

'I'm afraid it isn't very interesting,' she said. 'It's mostly just school and Mummy. Daddy died, you know, the winter after we were at Tourntourq, and I was sent to France because Mummy couldn't stand the racket I made in the house. When I came back from school last year Mummy had become an invalid. I tried to nurse her, but I wasn't much good. And I got into scrapes, and . . . and that's all. Now

I'm coming up to stay with the Deerings at Tourn-tourq.'

'What! You don't mean to say that you are the girl who is going to marry Jack Deering, Lord Deering's son.'

Tourntourq had risen to his feet. He towered above Esmé. He could not hide the dismay this news occasioned him. Indeed she thought that it was more than dismay, that it was reprobation. She bit her underlip in a gesture of indecision, and nodded slowly :

'Yes,' she said.

'You are the Esmé Hillier they're all talking about?' He added: 'Strange that I didn't connect the name with you . . . but it is so incredible . . .'

He glanced across the deck as if looking for some one, found the person he was looking for, and sat down again.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I didn't mean to be offensive . . . but . . .'

Suddenly he turned to her. 'Have you been engaged long? Do you know the Deerings well?'

'No. . . . Jack was at a dance at Torquay . . . that's where mother lives now . . . and we were engaged three days later. He went home at once. This is my first visit. . . . Lord Deering met me at Glasgow because Jack has a sprained ankle or something. He's sitting under the funnel now wrapped in rugs.'

'Yes,' said Tourntourq. 'I saw him.'

He was silent for a long time after that, so that she wondered what he was thinking. The mists had cleared from his eyes, and there was an angry look in them. But his face remained gentle. She was struck again by the beauty of his face, its clear lines, its strength, its suggestion of high purposes. The attraction he exercised was swift, like the wind. You seemed to hear the voice of the wind on his



moors. . . . She asked him suddenly, putting her hand on his arm in one of her quick gestures :

‘Please tell me . . . what you are thinking about. . . .’

‘I was thinking that—you will forgive me—that there is no reason in the world to explain why you should have become engaged to Jack Deering. At least, there is no reason that I can imagine.’

‘Ah, you have never been dependent upon anybody, you see. But that is hateful, isn’t it? Yes, I know it is hateful to speak like that.’

‘It is rather sad, I think.’

He frowned. So that was the reason. Her dependence on her mother, and the easy means of escape which the Deering millions had seemed to offer.

‘Life was too complicated a business?’ he asked gently. ‘You . . . threw in your hand. Oh, I understand very well. And Jack Deering is a lad with a lad’s freshness.’

Esmé glanced at him with wonder in her eyes, because he had unveiled her mind. She was just going to confess herself when she saw the blood mount to his cheeks. He turned to her with great bitterness in his face.

‘I know that!’ he declared, in tones that were almost passionate, ‘because my own case is so exactly like yours. Because I’ve thrown my hand in too. We are both sellers of our dreams.’

‘But Jack told me you were engaged to Dulcie Lacourt, the girl who was with you in the boat that day.’

‘Yes. She was my father’s choice for me. It has been one of our family traditions that we choose our sons’ wives for them. My father died last year. On his death-bed he asked me to marry Dulcie. I lacked the courage to refuse him.’

He passed his hand across his brow, as though the recollection pained him intolerably. Then he added :



‘Dulcie is a delightful girl. But there have been other dreams in my mind. . . . Sometimes I have teased Dulcie about them when I must speak them to somebody . . . about the dream-girl of the moorlands, with her hair like altar-fires, whose love is deep and swift and terrible. . . .

The clouds were big in his eyes now. Esmé remembered that Jack Deering had said he was supposed to have ‘second sight,’ or something. She remembered also that he had called her own hair ‘altar-fires.’ A little smile played with the corners of her lips.

## CHAPTER III

### WHAT BEER CAN BUY

HE took her back to Lord Deering, and Lord Deering received them gladly. Lord Deering was a fat little man with twinkly eyes, like a pig. He had fat hands and a fat soul. You were apt to feel, when you spoke to him, that his soul had been nourished, like his purse, on the beer he made, and that he was as proud of it as he might be of his dray-horses. When he saw Tourntourq he seemed to take out his soul and wave it.

That was because Tourntourq was a chieftain, a sort of king in his own country, whither the steamer was sailing, whereas Lord Deering was only an interloper in that country. It was Lord Deering's anxiety to pretend that he was a chieftain too . . . only in some other country that nobody had been to. He had already 'established the fact,' as he had been busy telling Esmé all the way down from Glasgow to Gourock, that his name wasn't Deering at all but M'Diarmid, and that he was really a relation of the Lord of the Isles, and so on. Esmé didn't care in the least whether he was a relation of the Lord of the Isles or not; but she couldn't help noticing that Lord Deering felt more valuable and also more unbusinesslike when he was talking about the M'Diarmids. That, she supposed, was his soul freshening up.

When Tourntourq brought Esmé along the deck Lord Deering glanced at her anxiously, as if to warn her that this was a person to be taken very seriously

indeed. Lord Deering's face, at that moment, expressed an insecure reliance upon the M'Diarmids, a hopeful reliance. His face was already a shade blue with the cold. He greeted Tourntourq noisily, and stuck out his fat hand. . . .

Tourntourq went away pretty soon, and then Lord Deering said to Esmé :

'Strange boy : . . strange boy,' as though he was an old chief appraising the merits of a very young one. He added in the same tones of portentous melancholy :

'The whole family is steeped in superstition . . . witches and ghosts and fairies and . . . and all that sort of thing' (he might as well have been saying 'bungs and taps and pint pots'); 'but beautiful. . . . They say he was a wonderful soldier. Guard, of course. Last year, when his father died, he came back to live at his castle . . . what they call castles hereabout.'

What Lord Deering called a castle was the biggest that beer could buy. But Esmé was not concerned with these subtleties of architecture. While Lord Deering pursued the subject she sat looking at the deep hills that held shadows even against the sunlight. Only now and again she glanced at Lord Deering. Her eyes were not kind to him. Lord Deering stopped after a while and read the *Scotsman*. When he tired of that he folded the paper carefully; he put it into the pocket of his overcoat. Then he lit a cigar. He was smoking very contentedly, when a girl with a pretty, pert face strolled past. The girl smiled at him, and went and stood directly in front of him, leaning upon the deck-rail. Lord Deering touched Esmé's shoulder with a fat finger.

'Look at that girl,' he said, 'worth looking at, I assure you. That's Nannie MacClure. She's called the Belle of Tourntourq.'

Esmé looked. She said : 'Quite pretty, yes.'

'Yes,' said Lord Deering, and his lips smacked.

He added : ' Figure 's the best part of her, eh ? Nobody could help admiring her figure. . . . ' His eye kindled. He at any rate couldn't help admiring it. That evidently was Lord Deering's cross. Esmé looked at him with chill disapproval. But he didn't notice her look. She understood him to say that, all things considered, Nannie MacClure was ' as tidy a little girl as was to be found anywhere. ' He added : ' And, by Gad, Esmé, she 's very like you. Very like, by Gad ! '

The steamer slowed down to take a pier. Esmé rose and looked over Lord Deering's head at the land which swung giddily nearer. She saw the black bonnet of Tourntourq away under the bridge ; Tourntourq's bonnet towered above the hats of the other men. She thought that he did look like a king. She sat down again. She clasped her hands together, and raised them upward to her cheek.



## CHAPTER IV

### LOVE GIRL

JACK DEERING had several things to recommend him. Broadly speaking, he was an honest boy, and he had averagely decent instincts. But Jack Deering was his father's son, and it was his father's son who had got engaged to Esmé. His mother's son would not have got engaged to Esmé. His mother's son would have married an heiress or somebody.

Love came to Jack Deering with her eyes full of tears. And Jack Deering thought love was the holiest things in the world. He told his mother that love was the holiest thing in the world . . . love like his love for Esmé, because there had been other less holy loves in the past. He was very much surprised, very much startled, when Lady Deering didn't say that she knew it was so.

What Lady Deering did say was :

'My dear Jack, at twenty-two so many things seem to be holy.'

Jack troubled himself a good deal about that remark of his mother's, but in the end he dismissed it from his mind. He told his sister Jennie about it, however, before he dismissed it. Jennie said :

'Mother's getting a bit bitter, I think. She and Father don't see eye to eye very often nowadays, do they? I think Father's frightened of Mother. . . .'

Jennie would have said more than this if Jack would have allowed it. But Jack would not allow it. Discussion of his father and mother, even by his sisters, displeased him very much. He told Jennie that it

was very wrong of her even to think such things. Jennie, who was nineteen, and quite pretty enough to understand men, laughed and went away, and thought to herself, 'Poor little Esmé . . . poor dear little Esmé.' Jennie was not the least sorry that her only brother was going to be stolen away by another girl.

The day Esmé came to Tourntourq Jennie met Kenneth Dalglish, and told him about Jack's point of view, and how Jack was so full of the soundings of love that he was offering himself as everybody's pilot. This was across the tea-table at Vore Castle. Kenneth Dalglish asked :

'Is Jack's girl . . . I forget her name . . . so awfully pretty then ?'

'Yes,' said Jennie slowly. 'I think she's awfully pretty . . . awfully pretty. Esmé's her name—Esmé Hillier. They used to come here long ago when she was a child.'

Jennie nibbled cake. At last she asked :

'Do you like pretty girls ? Most of them are bad-tempered, I think.'

'My dear, a pretty woman is like drink . . . one gets to heaven by means of her . . . for a time.'

Dalglish waved his cigarette, hailing the skies. . . .

'Drink is an illusion,' he said, 'tobacco is an illusion. . . . Give me my illusions, you may have the world.'

A footman appeared. Behind the footman came Dulcie Lacourt. Dalglish got up. Dulcie Lacourt shook her hands at Dalglish.

'No !' she declared, 'I hate you too much, Dalglish. Besides you tire me.'

She sat down, and Dalglish watched her. Her fair hair and her pink and white complexion made her look like one of the angels in a church panel. Dalglish thought whimsically that she was already the mother of the souls of innumerable small children ;

all her small children had cupid faces and yellow hair, and they sang carols. He sighed. There was something wonderful about this maternity. He waited till she raised her eyes and looked at him. She looked so gently that he laughed. He said to Jennie :

‘There, I have seen heaven again . . . the West End of it.’

Jennie laughed too. Dulcie was not disturbed.

‘You are so frightfully rude, Dalglish,’ she said, ‘that I don’t mind you. How horrid you must have been as a schoolboy. I hope you were thrashed very often.’

‘Oh yes, very often.’

‘Well, it hasn’t done you much good. . . . Perhaps if you had a wife . . .’

Dulcie Lacourt thought a moment, long enough to give Dalglish time to ask :

‘Where is Tourntourq, Dulcie ? He’ll have a wife soon, anyhow. I haven’t seen him for days. Has he run away or something. . . . The thought of getting married . . . ?’

‘He’s in Glasgow. He’s coming back by the boat to-day,’ said Dulcie. ‘You heard that we are to be married in the drawing-room at Tourntourq ? All the Tourntourq wives have been married there. . . . Besides Niall doesn’t like churches.’

‘And your father ?’

‘Oh, he’s in town. He’s coming back for the 12th. You know we’re having a lot of people at Glenduhl. Daddy loves it. . . . You’re having a lot of people, too, Jennie, aren’t you ?’

‘Oh yes,’ said Jennie drearily ; ‘Father’s friends and some of Mother’s own people. An admiral and a judge and a cabinet minister, I believe. Won’t you let me come and stay with you ?’

Jennie laughed. Jennie couldn’t help being a Deering, though she was much the best of the Deerings. She had pretty brown hair and a clear



skin. Dalgleish knew that lots of men admired her very much. Dalgleish let her go laughing out of his mind and took Dulcie into it again, Dulcie with all and all her babies. Dalgleish loved the sweetness of Dulcie. He came and sat beside her.

‘Well, Babs,’ he said, ‘how goes it, and what news? Fancy you look a bit tired. Is that wild man of yours behaving himself . . . and . . . oh, heaps of other things.’

Dulcie smiled her slow, quiet smile; she touched Dalgleish’s hand lightly with her hand, for they were friends. ‘Oh yes,’ she said, ‘he’s all right.’ Then she added: ‘Do you know, Dalgleish, I feel much more like Niall’s mother than anything else. Is that a bad beginning to married life, do you happen to know?’

‘I don’t know, Babs. I know that you are an angel and deserve heaven. I feel quite confident, too, that you won’t get it. Angels never do.’

Dulcie smiled, and then she shook her head.

‘Oh, Niall’s fond of me,’ she said, ‘in his own way. I’m not his “dream girl,” he says, but I’m his “love girl” . . . whatever that means. His “dream girl” lives on the moors—you know his talk—“a girl with a flame of hair like altar-fires, and eyes that beacon to . . . to . . .” I forget where. Mercifully the dream girl doesn’t ever come down from the moors, so there’s hope for me.’

He lay back on the sofa, and looked at Dulcie’s profile which the setting sun gave him, a fair gift. He asked in the tones of a man who has said his say, and would talk only fitfully:

‘Who is this girl Esmé Hillier—that is her name, I think—whom Jack Deering is going to marry? It seems she used to come here to stay, years ago.’

Dulcie shook her head.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I’m afraid I don’t remember her.’

## CHAPTER V

### LA MALADIE DE QUARANTE ANS

KENNETH DALGLEISH was another of those Highland lairdlings whose friends know them by the names of their dominions. His full style was Captain Kenneth Dalgleish of Dalgleish, just as Tourntourq's full title was Captain Niall MacCallien of Tourntourq. They were the only two lairdlings left in that corner of Argyll, for beer and whisky and stockbroking were completing a new conquest, beer and whisky and stockbroking in kilts and clan stomachers, and the rest of the gear.

Dalgleish had played with Tourntourq when they were both children, and Tourntourq had loved and hated, but mostly hated, Dalgleish with impartiality. Dalgleish held these memories still, but only dimly, because he had long ago formulated his opinion of Tourntourq.

When he left Vore Castle he walked slowly because there was much that troubled him in this marriage of Tourntourq and Dulcie; and the woods held consolation. . . . But comfort did not come out of the woods to-night, though the black firs that raise shaggy heads above the spruces and the other trees were still, and the trees whispered together in the sunset. . . . He stood a moment to view the miracle of the loch that goes out seaward, and the deeper miracle of the fields of the sea. The light ebbed, and the sea's face was cold. He heard a wind among the branches.

A hand was laid on his arm; he turned to find Mrs. Vericker. He began to laugh softly, as if the

presence of Mrs. Vericker had solved a puzzle in a manner unexpected . . . delightful. He said :

‘ I have been looking for you. . . . ’

‘ And I have been looking for you. . . . You had just left the castle when I got there. My car has gone round to the North Lodge. . . . ’ Mrs. Vericker paused. She glanced up at Dalglish ; her eyes were full of merriment. ‘ I wanted to walk in the woods with you,’ she said. ‘ Besides I have something to say.’

Mrs. Vericker was very young, only twenty-two. She was a widow. She had been a wife and a widow inside of a year. Her husband had just time to leave her much money before he died. Mrs. Vericker needed much money more than she needed a husband. But more than she needed either she needed a friend. She had found Dalglish. . . .

They walked a little way in silence under the big fir-trees that sprinkled the carriage way with gaping cones. Mrs. Vericker slipped her hand under Dalglish’s elbow. Once she gave his elbow a little squeeze that was pure comradeship.

‘ Dalglish,’ she said, ‘ I have come to beg. I had better get it over and be done because I hate it so. . . . I’ve got a cousin. . . . ’

Mrs. Vericker stopped ; in the half light Dalglish saw that her eyes were still merry as a schoolboy’s. He said :

‘ I know, Hal Newlands, you told me about him. . . . Was that his mother’s death I saw in the *Scotsman* a couple of weeks ago ? It was. . . . Then, my dear child, I can guess the rest. You want him down here . . . but obviously . . . you can’t have him to stay with you.’

‘ Yes,’ said Mrs. Vericker, ‘ quite obviously . . . ’ She sighed as if she knew these matters without understanding them. ‘ Hal is charming,’ she added. ‘ I love him. Men are only bearable, I think, at seventeen and seventy.’



‘ Before and after ? ’

‘ Yes . . . before and after.’

Dalglish laughed. . . , My dear Olive, of course Hal shall come and stay with me. What an opportunity of studying youth again. I owe you a thousand thanks. . . . Think of it, we shall most likely see him fall in love for the first time. . . . I mean the first real time, because, of course, the years below seventeen are palette work. . . . My God ! what palette work. Tell me, is Hal a woman’s boy ? ’

‘ No, but women like him . . . that is, they wish to like him. He has . . . what shall I say ? Soul . . . ideals . . . a mission. A boy of seventeen is such a temptation, isn’t he ? There are so many things that he may be, that he may be made to be. The conception of a soul, dear Dalglish, is more wonderful perhaps than the conception of anything else.’

‘ Why do you call me “ dear Dalglish ” ? ’ Dalglish asked pensively. ‘ So many women do that.’

Mrs. Vericker gave his arm another little squeeze ; she laughed softly.

‘ Perhaps because I want to be the mother of your soul. I think all women would want to be the mother of a soul like yours . . . for of course your soul isn’t born yet, is it ? How old are you ? ’

‘ Twenty-nine,’ said Dalglish.

‘ A man’s soul is born at thirty, not before.’ Mrs. Vericker stopped in the drive-way, and clutched hard at Dalglish’s arm. ‘ Dalglish, do you know,’ she cried, ‘ your poor little baby soul is in some woman’s heart getting made at this very moment ? Because, of course, it takes years and years to make a soul. . . .’

Dalglish opened his cigarette-case, and offered it to Mrs. Vericker. He said :

‘ These ideas of yours are rather alarming, Olive, don’t you think ? . . . I seem to see . . .’

Mrs. Vericker cut him short. 'You do not see,' she cried; 'that is the trouble with boys. It's only when they are men that they see. And then it is usually too late. Half the nice men of the world spend their lives wondering why they married their wives. Because, of course, all the really nice men get married in their perambulators. You know what the French call *la maladie de quarante ans*? There is another name for that sickness . . . soul hunger. Suppose you are married to Jennie Deering. At thirty or at forty, you have found out that Dulcie Lacourt is the mother of your soul. . . .'

'And at fifty,' said Dalgleish, 'I have forgotten it.'

'A man's soul dies at fifty,' Mrs. Vericker said sadly, 'the golden years are so few.'

Dalgleish lit a cigarette, and when the match flamed up Mrs. Vericker saw that his dark face was troubled. He waved her talk aside with a long sweep of his arm.

'That's settled,' he said. 'Hal comes to me. . . . But now there is this business of Dulcie and Tourn-tourq that is not settled. Without discussing the maternity of souls, it is clear, is it not, that . . . that Dulcie will perish in the attempt, so to speak?'

'Tourn-tourq is not a sensualist,' Mrs. Vericker said; 'I think Tourn-tourq's soul was born prematurely.'

'If you will have your talk . . . admit at least that it was not born of Dulcie. Tourn-tourq's soul was not born of woman.'

'He told me once about a dream girl with red hair. . . .'

'He has told everybody that yarn—Dulcie among the others. My dear Olive, how much of Tourn-tourq is real, and how much is pose? I have never been able to make out. But I think it is not all real.'

Mrs. Vericker shook her head. 'You're wrong,

Dalgleish. Remember you are an Englishman in all but name; Tourntourq is a Highlander with ten generations of Highland men and Highland women behind him. The country people, I know, live in terror of him, and they aren't bad judges. When my husband was dying, I remember, the lodge-keeper's wife came to advise me to have Tourntourq to see him. She declared that Tourntourq could tell me whether he was really going to die or not. His mother had that power before him and his grandmother. There is a story about his grandmother turning herself into a hare or something . . .'

Dalgleish laughed. 'My dear Olive,' he said, 'you are ridiculous. These Highland people are steeped in superstition. It is their great charm. The mischief is they have been told it is their great charm. When Tourntourq sees shrouds round people's heads or mists over their eyes, or any of the other things he sees and hears, don't you realise that it makes him important and interesting? Everybody is immensely amused, of course, and tells everybody else about it, and the yarn runs up and down the country for weeks.'

Dalgleish shrugged his shoulders; he had the sane man's contempt for the man who is more or less than sane. Mrs. Vericker said:

'You know what happened last year to the people who had my house . . . to their butler, I mean?'

'Something,' said Dalgleish. 'I can't say I listened very attentively. Died suddenly in the night, didn't he?'

'The day before the butler died he and the footman played a practical joke on that old woman who lives in the cottage behind Tourntourq Castle. They carried up a gramophone, and set it going behind her door. They knew the old woman had never heard a gramophone in her life. What they didn't know was that Tourntourq was in the



cottage talking to the old woman. You know how he is perpetually in his cottagers' houses. . . . Tourntourq came to the door when the gramophone began. He told the butler that he had only four hours to live.'

'And now he tells the story, I suppose?'

'Oh no, the footman told the story. Tourntourq refused to speak about it when I asked him.'

## CHAPTER VI

### HOW THE SERVANTS BEHAVE

LADY DEERING's greeting to Esmé implied a hope, cold as a dead fish, that Lady Deering would 'learn to like' her daughter-in-law. That was not, of course, what Lady Deering said. She was removed two full generations from the tan-yard that had been the foundation of her family's fortune. There was still, though, much leather in her soul.

What she actually said was :

'My dear child, we shall all love you . . . for Jack's sake as well as for your own.'

That was in Esmé's bedroom just before dinner. Lady Deering had been out lunching with a friend when Esmé arrived. Jack stood in the offing clutching a big stick, because his ankle was still very painful. It was tied up in many bandages. When he tried to draw near the bedroom door just as his mother was leaving, Lady Deering swept him away from it. Lady Deering's attitude to life was that an unlocked door means a theft. She excepted no one from this rule: her experience was all against exception.

Jack followed his mother away from the bedroom door like a naughty boy, and felt that he had been justly reproved. Lady Deering entered her own bedroom, and called him in there with her. She said :

'Jack, I'm horrified at you. You must never try to do such a thing again in my house. That's how the servants behave . . .'

A red spot burned in each of Lady Deering's cheeks. How the servants behaved was the very acme of abandoned degradation in her eyes. Indeed, the fact that her servants were prone to sin—as had been proved on several signal occasions—spoiled sin for her. Love, too, was under perpetual cloud; the servants possessed that field.

Lady Deering was a tall woman with a face that seemed scarcely large enough to contain her teeth. Not that her teeth were specially big; they looked big. Her nose had an upward tilt at the end, a tilt which Mrs. Vericker said was 'scriptural,' though she didn't explain why. Her nose led to her eyes infallibly. Her eyes were a pretty shade of grey, a different shade of grey from her powdered and leathery skin. Her hair was quite white.

Jack looked at his mother and felt that the lively oracles of a blameless life were with her. He said:

'My dear mother, I wouldn't think of such a thing. You quite misunderstand me. My foot was so sore, and I was moving into the light to see if the bandage were straight. . . .'

He stopped here, thrifty even in untruth. Lady Deering flushed under her powder because she hated to reveal the current of her mind.

'Dear Jack,' she said, 'I'm sorry.'

Lady Deering kissed her boy with unexpected passion; his smile when she kissed him was dew falling upon the drooping roses of her spirit.

The judge, and the admiral, and the cabinet minister who were to shoot on the 12th had not yet arrived, and so when Esmé came down to dinner she found only the members of the Deering family—Lord Deering in a kilt with a huge clan stomacher of silver and red stockings and buckle shoes, Lady Deering in a dress cut within the limits of propriety, Jennie Deering in pale blue, and Jack, also in kilts.

Lord Deering, at a signal from Lady Deering, bowed his head over the dinner-table and said :

‘Bless all these mercies and pardon all our sins,’ rather sheepishly, and then the dinner began.

Just as it began Esmé was startled to hear a flight of uncouth sounds wing up from the other side of a large green baize door, which appeared to connect the room with some offices beyond. The sound broadened out, and she recognised the bagpipes. She glanced at Lord Deering, and her glance brought a huge, melancholy smile upon his face. He nodded his head slowly, as though the sound of the bagpipes stirred emotions within him too deep for expression. Esmé thought of the M’Diarmids ; she was sure Lord Deering was thinking of them too. The piper in his seclusion was playing the ‘Bonnie Banks of Loch Lomond.’ Even Esmé recognised that he was a very unskilful piper.

‘Wonderful . . . wonderful,’ said Lord Deering, who had the most rooted dislike of bands in restaurants.

Jack looked a little uncomfortable, and Jennie gave Esmé a broad wink, which luckily Lady Deering missed. Lady Deering’s face was set in profound melancholy, as if she herself had been the fair lady destined to take the high road and be in Scotland before you. Presently, with the soup, she roused herself and said to Esmé :

‘You are not Scotch, my dear, so I suppose you can’t be expected to understand. I never hear that music without shivering.’

Lady Deering said ‘You are not Scotch,’ much as a white man might say to a negro ‘you are not white.’ But Esmé agreed about the shivering. She said :

‘It is so long since I have lived in the Highlands. I had no idea it was the custom to have the pipes at dinner.’



That gave Lord Deering his chance, and the M'Diarmids were dragged in by the hair of their heads once more, and everything about Lord Deering's gorgeous raiment and his clan stomacher and the pipes was explained at huge length. Esmé listened with her lips parted, and only the candle-light that played and paled and flamed in her hair betrayed her amusement. Jack watched her all the time with his simple eyes that had a queer greediness right at the back of them. Jack's lips grew hungry for kisses as he watched, and he had much trouble to keep his arms down by his sides as his mother approved.

The dinner ended at last. Then Jack claimed Esmé and took her away with him to the conservatory at the end of the hall, that was built out into the very deeps of the pine woods. There was a shaded lamp burning, and the place was warm. Esmé sat down in a low chair, piled up with cushions under her head and round about her. Then a footman brought them coffee and liqueurs on a silver tray that gleamed under the lamp.

Esmé wore a black frock with net sleeves that left her arms bare above the elbows. It was a simple frock, and the simplicity of it had clearly cost a great deal of money. Jack surveyed Esmé, and was satisfied. He came and sat on the arm of Esmé's chair. Esmé said wearily :

'Oh, not to-night, please. I'm so tired.'

Esmé's eyes were almost resentful. She slipped away at first from his handling as if his hands displeased and disturbed. A red-hot flush spread all over Jack's face. He even forgot the slight lisp he had picked up at Harrow from a very desirable acquaintance. He cried :

'My darling . . . if you knew how I have waited . . .'

Esmé sighed. She asked :

'What have you waited for ?'

‘You.’

‘Well, I ’m here.’

‘But . . . oh, surely, you understand, dearest . . .’

He could contain himself no longer. He bent and kissed Esmé violently on the lips, again and again, till she was almost smothered. He finished up by wrapping his arms round her and hugging her fiercely. There seemed to be plenty of original sinfulness in him to match the holiness of his love. His lips, when they weren’t pressed into Esmé’s round cheeks, kept babbling pet names, and love names, and vows and promises. Esmé suffered in resignation. Not a muscle of her moved. Her lips remained pressed together. She kept her eyes shut, because Jack’s eyes when he kissed her like this were like Lord Deering’s eyes on the steamer when he was looking at the village girl.

She escaped from him after a time. She got up and replaced some of the hairpins which he had pulled out of her hair.

Jack watched her, at his ease. There was a suggestion of easy superiority in his manner . . . of assured possession. He had done what he willed with his own, and there was an end of it. Knowledge that her unwillingness had not detracted much from his pleasure fanned Esmé’s exasperation.

She insisted on joining the family in the drawing-room.

## CHAPTER VII

### SOMETHING TO EAT

DALGLEISH went down to the pier to meet Hal Newlands. He called for Mrs. Vericker in his little car, and drove her down with him. On the pier were Lord and Lady Deering come to meet the Admiral and the Judge and the Cabinet Minister. It was the 11th of August.

Lady Deering introduced Esmé to Dalgleish and Mrs. Vericker. Dalgleish had a quick impression of blue eyes and rather wonderful hair. A phrase 'like altar fires' came into his mind. He couldn't remember for the moment where he had heard it.

Mrs. Vericker's first impression was a little different from Dalgleish's. Mrs. Vericker saw the blue eyes and the hair, too, but she discounted them. They mattered, of course, where men were concerned; they did not matter to her. Mrs. Vericker noticed that Esmé's mouth was a little weary, a little stubborn at the corners. She also noticed that Esmé's eyes were far away, as though Esmé took very little interest in her present surroundings. That set Mrs. Vericker wondering, and she tried a question at random to satisfy her curiosity. She said:

'My dear, I do so envy you. I think being engaged is the best part of life. . . .'

She smiled sadly, as though her life was already narrowing towards its end.

'Do you?' said Esmé. 'In that case being married must be . . .'. She checked herself suddenly. 'But you are married.'



‘My husband is dead. He only lived a year after our marriage.’

Esmé opened her eyes wide, and Mrs. Vericker recognised that it was an appeal for friendship. Mrs. Vericker nodded slightly to say that she was ready to make friends.

‘I hold no brief for . . . anybody,’ she said.

They had moved away together to the end of the pier. Mrs. Vericker sat down on one of the big stanchions which hold the steamer ropes. The smoke of the approaching steamer was just visible at the mouth of the loch. Esmé said, with a sudden flash of anger: ‘Do you know what it feels like to be eaten?’

Mrs. Vericker laughed and nodded.

‘Oh yes. I was eaten for a year.’

‘How long does it take to eat a woman?’ Esmé asked hopelessly.

They heard Dalgleish’s voice saying:

‘My dear Deering I haven’t seen Tourntourq for months. We belong to different worlds. . . . But if he’s shooting with you on the 12th . . .’

Dalgleish’s voice was drowned then in other talk, for the pier was crowded. Most of the people, Esmé thought, were horribly vulgar, the kind of people who suggest flannels beneath their summer frocks. . . . She asked:

‘Were you glad when he died . . . your husband, I mean?’

‘I missed him,’ Mrs. Vericker said. ‘But I suppose I was glad. You get used to being . . . eaten. I suppose in the end you might get to like it.’

‘I shall never get to like it,’ said Esmé positively. ‘Never! I hate being muddled and handled. There’s something inside me that gets angry. I want adventures . . . not kisses.’

Esmé’s face was piteous; there were tears in her eyes. Mrs. Vericker said:

‘Poor child, you will never get that. Because, you see, even the most spiritually-minded men never find what they need in a woman. I’m afraid it’s true that we women are not spiritual by nature. We’re domestic by nature, say what we will. Men ask for heaven, and we give them babies. . . .’

‘Oh, I love babies.’

A gentle light shone in Esmé’s eyes. . . .

‘Babies are men’s apology to God for being men,’ said Mrs. Vericker, and noted with interest that her epigram was quite lost on the girl. Esmé declared : ‘I’m pretty innocent, you see ; I only half know about things. Please tell me . . . do married women all have babies ? But, of course not, because you didn’t have any.’

‘I wanted to have a baby . . . but my baby never came.’

Mrs. Vericker looked so sad when she said this that Esmé was frightened into silence. She asked Mrs. Vericker’s name, and Mrs. Vericker told her. Then she begged to be forgiven if she had said anything cruel.

Dalglish strolled up to Esmé and began to tell her about the joys of life at Tourntourq, and especially at Clonaig, Lord Deering’s place. He spoke in his usual slightly bantering way that was not in the least offensive, and scarcely at all cynical. Esmé answered him good-humouredly enough. She was beginning to feel a little annoyed with herself for telling Mrs. Vericker so much.

Dalglish said : ‘We have heard a great deal about you, you know. Any new addition to the happy family is always sure of a good hard stare.’

Esmé smiled, and so recovered her temper. She liked Dalglish instinctively, recognising, if not a friend, at least some one ready to be friendly—some one, she thought, who would understand that a woman’s whole ambition is not necessarily bounded

by a man's arms. Dalgleish had plenty of what is called human quality in his face; his face was even a little too human. But it was manly and vigorous looking. He seemed to have a purpose in his life.

She turned away to watch the people crowding down the pier, for the steamer was just coming in now. Suddenly Dalgleish saw her start. She caught her breath. He glanced in the direction she was looking, and beheld Tourntourq moving in the middle of the throng. He was making his way towards Lord and Lady Deering whom he had recognised. Dalgleish smiled maliciously at the enthusiasm with which Lady Deering greeted him. Then the smile faded from his lips. He had just remembered who it was who had used the phrase 'like altar fires.'

Tourntourq left Lady Deering and came across the pier towards Esmé. His eyes were fixed upon Esmé's face.



## CHAPTER VIII

### ALTAR FIRES

DALGLEISH heard Tourntourq say to Esmé : ' I hoped I might find you here. Are you under penalties to stay, or can we go for a run ? My car 's outside.'

He saw too the look in Esmé's eyes which promised Tourntourq that she would go with him. He did not like that look. It lacked strength ; it was inspired a little by malice.

Esmé and Tourntourq went away through the crowd on the pier. Dalglish turned to Mrs. Vericker.

' Did you hear, Olive ? ' he asked ; ' and do you realise what it may mean ? '

' I realise that Lady Deering will be exceedingly angry when she finds out,' Mrs. Vericker said, ' and Jack Deering. How did she get to know him ? '

The steamer glided to the pier. Dalglish and Mrs. Vericker stepped backward to avoid the flying ropes. Dalglish could not even interest himself to identify Hal among the passengers crowding towards the steamer's side. He was thinking about Esmé and Dulcie Lacourt.

Mrs. Vericker roused him. ' There he is,' she said, ' over by the funnel. So like Hal to stand back and let the crowd go. . . . And there are,' she gasped in sudden mirth, ' the Judge and the Admiral and the Cabinet Minister. Oh, Dalglish, just look at them. Haven't they got it tattooed right on to their noses . . . POWER. I think men are the most delightfully ridiculous things in the world. How on earth does any one ever manage to take them seriously ! '

The Judge and the Admiral and the Cabinet Minister had evidently met before, because they were on very good terms with each other. They jostled heavily into the crowd round the gangway, just like the rather vulgar old men that they seemed to be. The Judge had smiles all over his face like fat question marks. His judicial expression, if he had one, seemed to have got arranged wrong way up. The Admiral, not to disappoint expectations, kept shouting his remarks in his biggest sea voice which, however, was getting a trifle squeaky. As for the Cabinet Minister, his face was so pinched with the cold wind that he seemed glad to shuffle along anyhow without trying to live up to anything. He had one of those long, moist noses which chill easily. Lord and Lady Deering were waiting at either side of the gangway, like two amiable police constables at a royal procession. A couple of footmen waited behind Lord and Lady Deering. Within a few minutes the three travellers were received, and fussed over, and welcomed, and hustled into the big Deering omnibus—a huge motor contraption, said to have been invented by Lord Deering himself, but suggesting the inspiration of Noah. Then Lady Deering looked round for Esmé. Lady Deering did not see Esmé.

‘Where has that child gone to?’ she complained to Lord Deering. ‘It’s really most inconsiderate of her.’

Lord Deering said he would go and find Esmé, and he trotted round the pier like a fat poodle looking for scraps of meat. He came to Dalgleish and Mrs. Vericker in the end, just as they were receiving Hal Newlands, and called out:

‘Have either of you seen Esmé? She’s lost, and we’re waiting to start.’

He was puffing and blowing in a most unwholesome manner. Dalgleish answered:

‘I saw her some time ago. I fancy she must have

thought there wouldn't be room for her in your omnibus, and so accepted Tourntourq's offer of a seat in his car. I certainly heard him invite her . . .'

'Yes . . . yes . . .' said Lord Deering, 'undoubtedly that's it.' He did not appear to care in the least what Esmé had done so long as he had a reasonable story to take back to his wife. He made off again instantly, as fast as his fat legs would run. His kilt swung up from his legs in the most alarming fashion.

Lady Deering was now exceedingly angry.

'Well!' she demanded in tones which suggested that Lord Deering had lost Esmé on purpose.

'My dear, it seems she's gone with Tourntourq. She thought there wouldn't be room in the 'bus.'

'Gone with Tourntourq! . . . Where has she gone with him?'

Lord Deering had no idea where. He turned half round as if he meant to trot back and ask Dalglish where Esmé had gone. His expression was exceedingly foolish. Lady Deering's mouth shut; it looked like a gin when shut. She got into the 'ark.' Lord Deering climbed in behind her, and sat humbly between the Admiral and the Cabinet Minister, who were engaged in the continuation of a wrangle about 'Sea Power.' The 'ark' started off with loud hootings to clear a path for itself through the crowd.

Dalglish's first impression of Hal was favourable. The boy looked clean; his hair was short; he was decently dressed. Dalglish did not attach great importance to these points in their presence; in their absence he would certainly have attached the greatest importance to them. When he shook hands with Hal, Hal looked him straight in the eyes. He had steady grey eyes. Dalglish thought that he was a good-looking boy, perhaps a little too self-assured in his manner.



Mrs. Vericker watched Dalglish closely when he was shaking hands with her cousin. She was very anxious that Dalglish and Hal should be friends; she had a feeling that Dalglish's friendship was the very best thing she could offer the boy at the outset of his life. Hal was much too rich, and much too independent for safety. And the gates of a school, she knew, so often opened on disaster.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE HOUR OF THE RUSHING WINGS

ESMÉ glanced at Tourntourq, who drove the car himself, and decided that he looked serious. Evidently he was feeling serious, though there was a sardonic suggestion in his expression, as if his whimsicality and his gravity were not properly reconciled to one another. She wondered with which of the two she would have to spend the time. And just when she was wondering he said :

‘ Good here, isn’t it ? Even if you do feel like a truant ? ’

‘ I feel free,’ said Esmé wistfully.

He glanced at her, and she saw pity in his face. It was very kind. He did not speak again, and she did not speak till they reached the castle and he took her into the dining-room which overlooked the loch.

‘ You ’ll stay to luncheon, won’t you,’ he begged, ‘ and then I can show you my treasures. Not that I fancy they will interest you much of themselves. Only a handful of sticks and stones. But perhaps when you understand the meaning of them you will find an interest.

He smiled in a way which disarmed opposition. Esmé laughed gaily. She glanced round the room, which looked heavy and sombre, very unlike its present owner, she thought, and yet in a vague way suggesting him. The furniture was old and soiled and dark—massive. There were some portraits on the wall, two of them portraits of women, and the rest men in Highland costume. The women had the same

expression, though they were dressed a hundred years apart. It was a sad expression, but there was surprise in it too, as if these Tourntourq wives had never quite got accustomed to the cause of their sadness. Esmé was aware of a slight uneasiness. She glanced at the men. The faces of the men, she thought, might explain the expressions of the women.

The men were also separated by long years, but there was the family likeness in them all—a curious, rather commanding gentleness that might be attractive or disturbing according to the mood you were in. These men had not known what it felt like to be crossed or thwarted. They couldn't have cheated anybody, or lied, or done any of the things that bring a man up against himself with a bang. There were no bangs in their natures. . . .

Tourntourq indicated the newest looking of the group—a short, thick man, with a beard and sharp black eyes.

'That's my father,' he said—'the late Tourntourq.'

His voice was suddenly respectful. It had lost every trace of vivacity.

'My father,' he added solemnly, 'was a true chief and a remarkable man. My father ruled Tourntourq with a rod of iron. No man ever disputed his word, and no man ever made a decision without asking his advice. In my father's day the social life here had a meaning that it has quite lost now. It was not just an excuse for amusing ourselves. People like the M'Corquedales of the Lochs and the Gregor M'Gregors, with a high sense of their responsibility, controlled our social life. . . .' He waved his hand. 'And now they are gone . . . my father dead, the Miss M'Corquedale, who is the last of that family, scarcely ever out of doors, and Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor, who is younger than her husband, over eighty. One scarcely hears their names; not half of the people of Tourntourq have seen them.'



He turned and opened the folding doors at the end of the room. They passed into a long gallery with a vaulted stone roof carved in bizarre shapes. The gallery was lighted at the far end by a big window, the red panes of which made stains on the floor. The effect was a trifle stagey. Esmé smiled.

'Ah,' said Tourntourq, 'it means more than you think.'

He shut the doors carefully. Esmé saw that the walls of the gallery were covered with more portraits of men and women. One of the women reminded her rather of Tourntourq. Under the pictures there were running tables like the benches in a museum, with bits of stone, and carvings, and other things.

'I hope I shall not bore you,' he said, in tones which she thought were a little excited. 'Listen . . . do you see those bits of stone and stuff. Well, they are all that remains of a very great and wonderful religion.'

'Religion?'

'The religion of adventure. . . .'

She glanced at him to make sure that he was quite serious. He was quite serious, even earnest. She thought, too, that there was a distinct intensification of the misty look in his eyes. Yet his eyes seemed to burn away at the back of them . . . or perhaps it was only the red light from the window.

'I'm afraid I don't understand,' she said . . . 'they look to me like . . . like a museum. . . .'

Tourntourq said:

'Ah . . . but listen . . . in old days men and women were free, and they lived and loved like nature. Nature loves very slowly up to a supreme moment, and then there is a rush . . . like wings. And so in old days they worshipped the hour of the rushing wings . . . see.'

He picked up a small carved stone of a shape quite indeterminate, and handed it to her.

‘The sign of the rushing wings,’ he said.

Esmé took the stone and looked at it closely. It conveyed nothing to her. He waited patiently for her comment. When she made no comment, but just handed back the relic, he said :

‘That is a symbol. It symbolises the love of a better world ; the old love which is dead, nearly, among city people ; but the birds and beasts have not forgotten it, and there are still old *sagas* sung in my woodlands, old splendours like God’s miracles, the splendour of the dawning, and the splendour of the sunset, and the splendour of the high night. And there is the splendour of youth, and the splendour of a woman’s face. . . .’

His voice had grown louder, but he still held it in restraint. And its gentleness was not in the least abated. Esmé was surprised at the gentleness of his voice because, in spite of this, its passionate intensity was unmistakable. She yielded to the spell of it. Her eyes grew cloudy. Suddenly he lowered his voice and whispered, speaking in a kind of rhythm that flowed from his lips without the smallest effort :

‘There is a truth of love, but you have never known it as yet. It is like the truth of the stars and the woodlands . . . the truth that the sea holds in its deeps . . . the truth that is sped with the javelins of the sun. You cannot catch that truth in words ; you cannot say it. Is it dead because you cannot say it ? Is the sunlight dead when we live behind prison walls ? The name of the truth is adventure.’

He picked up another piece of stone carved to represent a young woman. The face was worn away, but the figure remained.

‘Look !’ he cried, ‘this is love . . . the promise. To be worshipped because of the beauty it is, and because of the beauty it may bring forth if . . . if . . . *if a like beauty seek it and find it*. And the greater, the fiercer the adventure, the more perfect

the achievement. Beauty is swift, and strong, and fearless. He who made us made us not of dust but of the fires of His Spirit. Every beautiful, passionate thing is fertile in its passion, yet cannot be fertile unless its adventures, unless it seeks, unless it struggles, wars, and suffers. So youth, which is the symbol of adventure is also the symbol of abundance, because when youth and beauty rush together, there is creation.'

He stopped suddenly, and it was very still in the gallery. Then he repeated in tones of awe :

'I believe in Youth, the Maker of Heaven and earth, and of all living things, and in Passion, the strong soul of Youth, that, consuming, creates.

'I believe in Beauty, which is the form and face of Youth upon all created things, upon the flowers that swoon in gardens, upon the birds that fill heaven with their singing, the lark that is the messenger of the gods, the thrush whose melody is like fountains of silver, the nightingale which calls on the soul of woman to mate—upon men and women, who beholding the form and face of Youth, follow it through death and sorrow and pain.'

He paused, and held out his hand to Esmé. She took his hand.

The gong sounded for luncheon.



## CHAPTER X

### THE PRICE OF LIFE

AT luncheon Tourntourq was quite merry. His mood seemed to have been left behind in the gallery with his carvings and things. Esmé soon recovered from the effect he had produced on her, and then she rather enjoyed the effect, as she often enjoyed a play more in the retrospect than at the moment of witnessing it.

They talked about the Deerings, and he declaimed against the way in which Highland customs were filched to gratify commercial vanity.

‘All our customs at which the world has been taught by fools to laugh are real and vital expressions of a national consciousness,’ he declared. ‘They have their meaning for those who understand them. I am the chief of my clan here. So when I wear my clan belt with its big silver buckle I am like a colonel at the head of his men. Your colonel takes off his uniform and becomes a civilian. But the office never dies. It is never for sale, and is never allowed to become ridiculous. When a chief dies, it is like taking off the uniform; but the chieftainship does not die . . . or did not. The pipes are our music, expressing our history, our struggles, our ideals, our hopes. The piper of the clan stood beside the chief, linking him, in his music, with the past and its inspiration. When the chief sat down to eat, the piper marched at his door, and the clansfolk gathered and sat down also like a family. . . .’

His voice tailed away . . . he seemed to be over-

come with gloom because of the change in fortune that was destroying this world of the past.

‘Old Deering is probably the best of his whole crowd,’ he declared suddenly. ‘I can bear him.’

‘I like him much the best of them,’ Esmé said. ‘He’s human, at any rate. . . .’

The meal ended. The butler brought them coffee and cigarettes with small glasses of whisky, which Tourntourq said had been distilled years ago on the place in defiance of law. Esmé only touched the glass with her lips. The whisky was very potent.

They went out into the woods together. The sky had grown dark, and a cloud bank was coming up solemnly out of the sea. A few drops of rain began to fall. Tourntourq took her to a summer-house which stood above the jetty where his boats were moored. She noticed that he still seemed excited, and she wondered what it was that was exciting him. His excitement communicated itself in spite of her reluctance. She thought that he had a kind of mental undercurrent that was more actual than his speech.

She sat down in the summer-house, and he stood by the door, facing her, to wait for the shower to pass. He talked frivolously about all the people in the neighbourhood, though not maliciously. It was astonishing how soon his moods changed. Esmé watched him out of half-closed eyes. She saw mood after mood express itself on his face. She thought he lived in a kind of perpetual mental storm, he seemed to realise every one of his thoughts and every pose, almost to study them, to pass judgment on them. She suspected that all the time he was justifying to himself his queer ideas. She wondered if that attitude arose out of his view of himself as a chieftain, for she did not think that he was simply a poseur. If he had been simply a poseur

he would not have acted as he did on the steamer when they first met. . . . She recalled the meeting of Shelley and Mary Godwin, and glanced at him in sudden apprehension. And he seemed to divine the current of her thought, for he cried :

‘ My dear Esmé, the price of life is death—of joy, sorrow—of beauty, corruption—of passion, bitterness. This livery the woods already begin to put on, the saffron, the crimson, the yellow, the clear green, the scarlet, it is the livery of death. We are but moments in the years of the Gods.’

On the way back to the castle they met two men, tenants of Tourntourq, who had come to consult him on some matter relating to the estate. Esmé half expected to see him brush the men aside or dismiss them. She was surprised when, on the contrary, he received them with a cordiality that was almost ceremonious. A curious change seemed to come over him, indeed. He recalled a parent listening to the troubles of his children.

The men had come to tell him that his piper had taken ill, and would not be able to pipe at dinner that night. They wanted to know if they should cross the loch for the piper who acted as substitute on these occasions. Esmé felt inclined to laugh at the absurdity of the whole thing, but something in the men’s faces and in Tourntourq’s face warned her that she had better not. Evidently this was a much more serious business than appeared on the surface.

Tourntourq decided after some consideration that the men had better fetch the substitute piper. He declared :

‘ I think it would have been my father’s wish.’

The men went away. He turned to Esmé.

‘ My father, the late Tourntourq, never to the day of his death, sat down to dinner without the pipes. And as long as she lived my dear mother kept up the custom—and all our customs. . . . It would be like



breaking faith with the past if I allowed it to fall into neglect even for a night.'

He became silent after that; he seemed to recede far away from her into another world. She had been told that on the subject of his late father and his family customs he was more peculiar than on any other subject; but it did not strike her as a peculiarity now that she saw it for herself. It was rather a sort of iron family discipline that held him and bent him.

'Do your people come to you with all their troubles then?' she asked. 'It is positively patriarchal.'

'Oh yes . . . my father was friend and counsellor to the whole county. . . . He would have wished me to carry on his work.' He added after a moment: 'My father believed in the clan system as he believed in God. The more I see of life the more convinced I become that he was right.' He looked very sad. She touched his hand in a little gesture of comradeship, a gesture out of the world of kind spirits.

He smiled at her gesture, and she thought that his smile was the most winning she had ever seen.

They climbed back towards the castle. But before they reached it he decided to take her back to the Deerings at once. They chose a pathway through the woods. The rain was now descending in a solid downpour.

## CHAPTER XI

### MADONNA

ESMÉ's adventure with Tourntourq whipped Jack Deering. When his mother told him of it in the intervals of seeing that the Admiral and the Judge and the Cabinet Minister had soap to wash with, and blankets on their beds, and towels to dry their faces (all of which things Lady Deering's servants had seen to long before) he became so pale that she thought he was going to faint. She, therefore, whittled down the story a little, emphasising the fact that Esmé had thought there was no room in the omnibus. She concluded :

'And you know Tourntourq, how ridiculous he is. I mean he's sure to keep her half the afternoon listening to his talk about fairies and wraiths. . . . It is so seldom he can get any one to listen to him.'

Lady Deering went away to worry the servants. Jack Deering, whose foot was still rather swollen, sat down on his bed. His face was so miserable that the sight of it in the glass brought tears to his eyes. He began to ache for Esmé, as your tippler aches for alcohol when the bars are closed. Because she was not now within his reach, her value rose swiftly in his mind. He made up his mind to hasten their marriage. The idea of making her his wife filled him with pleasure.

The next stage in this process of being sorry for himself was a feeling of great and even beautiful resignation. Jack Deering felt that Esmé needed a protector, a shield, a guide, a counsellor. It was just

innocence and inexperience which prompted her to do these things. He could see her little shoulders tilting as she prattled away to the queer man who had . . . *kidnapped* her.

Jack Deering did not know how the word 'kidnapped' came into his mind. It seemed to come itself like an ill bird. It made him jump with fear and exasperation. What if Tourntourq had done this designedly! What if he desired to possess Esmé for himself! What if Esmé had allowed herself to be carried away by the glamour of his appearance and his talk! Certain little experiences in his own life, experiences he now tried to forget, warned him that love is an emotion capable of all sorts of unexpected developments . . . a feeling of righteousness overwhelmed him . . . a feeling big with reproof of others and of punishment even. . . .

Just then the gong sounded, and he went down to tea. Esmé and Tourntourq were in the drawing-room, and Tourntourq was apologising for Esmé with so much charm that Lady Deering had already forgiven both of them. Lady Deering was delighted that the Judge and the Admiral and the Cabinet Minister should find Tourntourq in her drawing-room. She felt that his presence added the touch which brings conviction. She could scarcely restrain herself from asking Tourntourq to tell them 'all about' his 'delightful Highland superstitions'; as it was she did her best to draw and exhibit him.

The Judge and the Admiral were too firmly convinced of their own importance to pay much attention to an erratic lairdling, but the Cabinet Minister, curious by instinct, addressed himself to Tourntourq. He had, it appeared, made a close study of the Crofter Question. He was developing his ideas in a round voice when Lady Deering noticed that Esmé was shivering.

'Child,' she cried, 'you are soaking wet. . . .



Really, Tourntourq, I do think you might have taken better care of her.'

Tourntourq woke up from the sleep to which the Cabinet Minister's voice had lulled him, and made more excuses. He was just in the middle of these when Jack Deering came into the room. His arrival afforded him a chance of escape from excuses. The Cabinet Minister was writhing in the birth-pains of his solution of the Crofter Question, and so was ready to begin again instantly. Lady Deering began to marshal Esmé out of the room to her bedroom.

Jack Deering poured himself out a cup of tea, and Tourntourq dozed off again under the hypnotic tones of the Cabinet Minister. Tourntourq heard, as it seemed far away, the voice of the Judge discussing the health of grouse in Yorkshire, and the difference between Yorkshire and Highland moors. The Judge appeared to be full of information on these topics, and the Admiral, having regard to his solemnity as he listened to him, appeared to be convinced of their importance.

The Cabinet Minister completed his survey of the legal aspect of Crofters, and came on to discuss the economic aspect. He said :

'Of course, Tourntourq, you will allow that the clan system is dead . . . we have to rebuild on new foundations.'

'No, I will not allow that. . . . I consider the clan system the best ever devised for government.'

'But, my dear fellow, as a matter of practical politics . . .'

'As a matter of practical politics I find it answers admirably. My relations with my tenants and clansfolk are admirable. I am the centre of their cosmos ; their chief as well as their laird ; their friend and adviser. I have all manner of strange rights over them . . . and they have rights over me.'

The Cabinet Minister sighed. His long, moist nose pecked at the air in silent protest against this mediævalism.

‘Of course,’ he said irritably, ‘it is picturesque and all that sort of thing. But as a landlord in the twentieth century you must perceive . . .’

‘I don’t. Nor do I think of myself as a landlord. I am simply the head of my clan.’

Jack Deering, who had been listening, glanced at him with hostile eyes. A lively hatred of Tourn-tourq began to waken in Jack Deering’s mind . . . a hatred that had its springs in fear.

The Cabinet Minister controlled his rising exasperation. He belonged to the Group whose heavens are worked by steel shafts and lighted by electricity . . . whose gods dwell in Chubb safes.

‘Alas, the age of chivalry is past,’ he said. ‘The warrior is of less account now than the creator of wealth. We must beat our swords into ploughshares, my dear sir; we shall not need them as swords any more.’

This remark was overheard by the Admiral, and resented by him. He bellowed out :

‘That’s your treason again, Merridew. Can’t understand you fellahs at all. What d’ye suppose the German Navy is for? Regattas, eh? Country’s going to the dogs; and it’s you political fellahs who are hurryin’ it along. Two keels for one, I say, and the devil take the hindermost.’

The Admiral got up and thrust his person solidly over the fire.

‘There you are,’ he added, as if he had just successfully torpedoed the Cabinet Minister, and was watching him sink. Tourn-tourq laughed, because the stupidity of the Admiral had something childish and pleasant about it, whereas the wisdom of the Cabinet Minister was moist and greasy, like his nose.

‘I quite agree with you, Admiral,’ he said; ‘we

shall want our fighting men rather badly one of these days. I fancy the present world is much too disagreeable to last. Men need air, you know.'

'They need bread,' said the Cabinet Minister softly, as if he afforded the company a valuable secret, the possession of which proved his fitness for the post he occupied.

'And beer,' said the Judge blandly, bringing his thin fingers together in a deliberative gesture, well known in the Law Courts.

Tourntourq frowned, and then the blood rushed up into his cheeks.

'They need life,' he cried, 'adventure, freedom. . . . That is my quarrel with your new democracy . . . it is adventureless. It lacks the element of surprise; there are no splendid and no terrible possibilities. The baker and the milkman are there at the door punctually every morning; the factory is clean and healthy and warm . . . pay day comes regularly once a week. The honest man may breed his children in safety: the rogue goes to jail. The rich man may grow richer. . . . And that is a man's life! I say it is the life of a stalled ox . . . of a slave . . . oh, much worse, for these may be rebels if they choose. But your pap-fed proletariat has no rebelliousness. To the hooting of a horn, to the clang of a bell it lives and dies, goes to work and returns from it, eats and drinks and is not merry. These skies have no horizons, these heavens no rushing wings of light, these midnights no gloom. Fear chills not these fatted flocks, shepherded by your new sciences; anger sweeps not over them like God's wind; laughter is not brewed in their dull bellies, nor is the raven-wing of grief drooped on their eyes. They know not the *wanderlust* of the gods; they know not the call of the sun's setting by great waters; they know not the strong agony of the tempest, nor the voices of darkness that wail and shriek among stricken trees. . . .'



He stopped suddenly. The Judge and the Admiral exchanged glances ; they had heard about his eccentricities. . . . Nevertheless, it was evident that his outburst had made an impression on them, because their eyes were bright. Only the Cabinet Minister was quite unimpressed. He looked at Tourntourq with pity, recognising, it seemed, a harmless imbecile. The Admiral sighed :

‘By Gad!’ he declared, ‘there’s some truth in what you say, and I don’t mind admitting that that about the sun’s setting . . . what was it? . . . “the call of the sun’s setting by great waters” rather touched me . . . eh? When I was a snottie I believe I used to hear something of the sort. . . .’

The Cabinet Minister blew his nose in a prolonged and exasperated fashion.

‘Ah yes,’ he remarked, ‘most poetic, I’m sure. Unhappily I never understood poetry. . . . If I may say so without offence . . . most unpractical . . . *most* unpractical.’

He was about to enlarge upon the unpractical nature of Tourntourq’s opinions, for he had vast funds of argument, when Lord Deering came into the room with Dalglish, and Mrs. Vericker, and Hal Newlands. Lord Deering had met them walking past his gates and had, as he said, ‘dragged them along’ with him. Lord Deering introduced everybody to everybody else with a fat wave of his hand and much mouthing of names. He was just finishing up when Lady Deering and Esmé returned to the room. Esmé was dressed in a blue frock with thin strands of gold worked upon it. Dalglish turned to shake hands with her, and as he did so, caught sight of Hal Newlands’s face.

Hal Newlands was looking at Esmé as the saints in the Old Masters look on the face of the Madonna.

## CHAPTER XII

### GALAHAD

DALGLEISH was still undecided in his opinion of Hal. He had an idea that it would be better for a time to remain undecided.

Hal was quite healthy so far as the larger issues were concerned, but he had managed to gather a good many illusions. He had also—as was to be expected at his age—persuaded himself that these illusions of his were of the character of deep truth.

He had tried Dalgleish with a few of them at luncheon that very day, and the experiment had proved uncomfortable for both of them. Dalgleish was not interested. He said bluntly that he was not interested, and he bore Hal's rather wistful regrets with bad grace. When Hal continued his exposition in a pained voice, Dalgleish cut him short with the request not to be an idiot, uttered in the crispest possible tones.

'Why should it be idiotic to talk about what I think about?' the boy demanded with some indignation.

'Can't say. . . . It is, though . . . rottenly idiotic, too.'

The subject was dropped after that, and they discussed cricket. Dalgleish liked Hal at once when he was speaking about games, because Hal had the right spirit as regards games. He was keen, and he knew what he was talking about.

Dalgleish had vision enough to recognise the true in the boy's outlook, and to discount the merely

incidental. The boy's outlook was the outlook of seventeen—of adolescence. He thought of his own father's advice to him at the same age just before he went to Sandhurst. 'Games, my lad, till you're tired. When you're tired, you won't worry.' He repeated the advice for what it might be worth. Then he took Hal out to find Mrs. Vericker.

Hal and Mrs. Vericker were like mother and son, Dalgleish thought. Hal treated her with a gentle courtesy, that was like the courtesy oldish men sometimes show. She treated him with vast good nature and a little raillery. She, too, perhaps had detected the sentimental bent of the boy's mind. Hal did not resent her raillery, though he sometimes protested against it. In Mrs. Vericker's company he was more boy and less man than in Dalgleish's company.

They decided to brave the wet afternoon, and go for a walk on the moor. Hal wanted Dalgleish to teach him to fish and shoot, and Dalgleish promised. They arranged expeditions to one of the hill lochs, and also for the later autumn a day on the upper summits of the hills to shoot white hares. Dalgleish talked about fishing and shooting all the afternoon, and Hal listened with the most eager attention, because it opened up a new world to him. He began to feel a strong respect for Dalgleish.

As they came down through the woods a cock-pheasant went whirring up over their heads, and Dalgleish pointed his stick at it like a gun and followed it over the tree-tops. There was a charm for the boy in the easy, sure way he swung the stick up into position, and the steady movement of the stick along the line of the bird's flight. Mrs. Vericker saw the colour come to Hal's cheeks, and was glad because she wanted him to be an outdoor man like Dalgleish.

Neither Dalgleish nor Mrs. Vericker had wished in the least to go to tea with Lord Deering, but now, seeing the look on Hal's face that Esmé had wrought,



Dalgleish was glad that they had been overruled. He recognised that an event in the boy's life had taken place. He glanced at Esmé to see if she had understood the meaning of what was toward. Esmé had not understood. Esmé's eyes were very tired. They were turned away from Hal towards Tourntourq.

The Cabinet Minister, balked for a moment of his prey by reason of the new arrivals, was in the act of opening a fresh offensive. Dalgleish heard him say to Tourntourq who stood near him :

‘ But, my dear sir, consider for a moment . . . ’

The rest of the Cabinet Minister's remarks were lost in the general conversation. Tourntourq's reply, however, came quite clearly across the room.

‘ I deny,’ he exclaimed, ‘ that life is becoming more spiritual. It is becoming much less spiritual. You politicians preach the doctrine of the State . . . that is the doctrine of individual renunciation and self-sacrifice. The whole idea is false . . . false. What we give to the State or to any other corporation we lose. There is no compensation for that loss. The whole doctrine of Socialism is a lie. We renounce nothing gladly. We are glad only when we have the spending of our own lives. And it is the same with religion. The savage who bows down before the rising sun is more truly spiritual than all saints and all martyrs.’

‘ No !’

Everybody started ; the word was spoken with such quiet and clear emphasis. And Hal, who had spoken the word, rewarded the attention he got. His face glowed, his head with its rigorously cropped hair was thrown back, his body seemed to be drawn up as if to take or give a blow. Tourntourq turned sharply, and when he saw the boy, breathing angrily upon him, smiled. Tourntourq's smile promised that he would not resent this antagonist.

‘No?’ he repeated, with banter in his tones.

Esmé looked at Hal, this time with interest. Dalgleish who watched her, saw the interest kindle in her face. Nor did the interest fade when Hal, keeping his ground with difficulty against the floods of shyness which rolled upon him, exclaimed:

‘Oh, surely, you don’t mean what you say. All saints and all martyrs have tasted what your savage never knew . . . sacrifice . . . pain . . .’

His words outstripped the courage that sustained them. He grew more confused and hesitated. Then he no longer tried to speak. A sneer from Jack Deering to the effect that ethics were beyond him filled the unpleasant silence. Tourntourq’s smile grew more engaging:

‘We shall argue that again, if you will,’ he said to Hal, ‘somewhere else.’ He turned to the Cabinet Minister:

‘It almost appears, my dear sir, that the age of cotton is at an end. Our young men see visions . . .’

He raised his eyebrows.

‘Only an earthquake can disturb the new industrial equilibrium, if that is what you mean,’ said the Cabinet Minister pityingly.

‘An earthquake?’

‘A cataclysm . . . disaster . . . war . . . famine. . .’

‘Indeed!’ said Tourntourq. ‘Then in that case I fancy that I am on the side of the earthquake.’

## CHAPTER XIII

### MUSTARD

ESMÉ felt shivery after tea, and decided not to go down to dinner. The thought of the pipes, and the stomachers, and Lord Deering's sentimental leers, and Lady Deering's weary make-believe, the Admiral and the Judge and the Cabinet Minister, and most of all Jack and his appetite for kisses, weighed the balances against action. She sent a message by Lady Deering's maid that she had a 'headache.'

Lady Deering was very much annoyed when she got Esmé's message, because she felt that it was Esmé's wilfulness and lack of consideration which had brought the trouble upon her. Esmé owed a debt already for absconding with Tourntourq, and a headache was by no means sufficient security for this fresh credit. The dinner-party was spoiled because the men liked Esmé, and would be sulky at her absence. Lady Deering set her mouth, shutting in her teeth for once, and resolved on reprisals. A glance at Jack's miserable face—the face of a greedy boy who is not allowed to have any more cake—hardened her resolve. Only Lord Deering seemed to have any real sympathy with the sufferer. And his expressions of that sympathy, which were hearty and unaffected, did him no good. Lady Deering felt it to be her duty to check certain boyish enthusiasms which her husband revealed every now and then.

The Admiral, however, was not under restraint, and he expressed his opinion openly, aiming his remarks



at Jack. 'After all,' he declared positively, 'you can't quarrel with a sick headache.'

'I'm not quarrelling,' said Jack, who resented the Admiral's intervention, in spite of the fact that the Admiral was his godfather, and had smacked him as a small boy.

The Admiral blinked his eyes, burying them in mirth.

'Oh no,' he said, 'but you're ready to quarrel. New generation takes itself so confoundedly seriously. My day we'd have thanked our lucky stars if a pretty girl looked at us. By Gad! we'd have gone down on our knees to her, headache and all.' The Admiral turned to Lady Deering:

'Eh, Felicia; my day we valued our blessings?'

The Cabinet Minister smiled his vinegar smile. He had a wife and children.

'I fear,' he said, 'that age and memory are in inverse ratio to one another, my dear Admiral. Now my own recollection of my young days is of a time of restraint and toil. Nor can I remember having ever felt disposed to . . . what was your expression?—go on my knees to any one.'

They wrangled on. At last Lady Deering rose and left the table. After she had gone, and when the port was making generous tour, Lord Deering also slipped out with a big pear secreted about his person.

Lady Deering went from the dining-room to Esmé's bedroom. Esmé was comfortably tucked in bed, reading a novel, and forgetting Jack. When Lady Deering came in she closed the novel on her finger. Her hair was spread about her on the pillows. Lady Deering said:

'My dear child, I'm so sorry about you. I have come to insist that you shall have a mustard leaf on your chest. I think mustard leaves are so safe. I always put a mustard leaf on dear Deering's chest when he has a cold, and Jack has been brought up on them.'

She had a packet of mustard leaves in her hand, a nasty looking yellow packet, with red ink writing all over it . . . the sort of thing that blisters your mind to look at. She began to pull one of the leaves out of the packet, and Esmé saw that the back of the leaf was grey to blackness. It had a business-like appearance that froze Esmé's blood.

'Oh, no, no,' she cried, 'I hate mustard. Besides I'm really quite well. I mean it's only this horrid old headache. My lungs are quite all right—quite, quite all right.'

Esmé fluttered her hands in Lady Deering's face. She didn't know what she was saying, scarcely. Lady Deering's eyes were so hard and terrifying; they seemed to have been rolled out of vast numbers of pills. She moved across the bed towards the wall.

'My dear,' said Lady Deering, 'you are not all right. I can see that you are not all right.' A savage joy lit up Lady Deering's face. 'And I insist upon your having this leaf on your chest. If you refuse to have it I shall have no option but to send the car into Tourntourq village for Dr. MacGregor. And I know Dr. MacGregor will agree with me. He always does. Why, I nursed all the children myself. I nursed them through the most serious illnesses. Jack was given up twice with pneumonia after measles, and Jennie had the most dreadful time with scarlet fever. And Mabel . . .'

'No . . . no,' cried Esmé, interrupting the recital of the family's struggle with, and conquest over, disease, 'please, please no. I'll . . . oh, I'll promise never to have a headache again.'

Esmé was genuinely terrified, because the mere thought of the mustard on her skin filled her with dread. Quite a number of people feel that way. The mystery of drugs is not yet quenched. There was something fiendish in the suggestion that she should permit her flesh to be tortured by these leaves,

to be scalded and blistered and broken. She half rose in the bed, pushing back from Lady Deering.

'Really, Esmé,' Lady Deering said, 'you are ridiculous. You would think from the way you are behaving that I was a hangman, or somebody come to take your life. My children never . . . never behaved like that even when they were tiny tots. I should certainly have punished them smartly if they had.'

The last remark was made with a smack—like a hard hand hitting soft flesh. Lady Deering's expression said that she would gladly give Esmé a whipping if she dared, that giving Esmé a whipping would afford her most peculiar delight. Her fingers, sinuous with rings, positively seemed to twitch.

'I won't,' Esmé cried, 'and that 's all.'

'You refuse to obey me?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Then I shall send for the doctor. Jack shall go for the doctor.'

Lady Deering was shaking with rage now. Her face was as red as a postage-stamp. Her bulging teeth distinctly suggested the perforated margin of a postage-stamp.

'If the doctor comes, I will not see him. I will be rude to him.'

'You shall see him.'

'I warn you, Lady Deering, I shall not.'

'Don't dare to speak like that to me, Esmé.'

'Don't dare to interfere with me. I'm not your daughter. I'm not even your daughter-in-law yet. . . .'

Suddenly, to Esmé's amazement, Lady Deering crumpled up like one of those toy balloons that are called 'dying pigs,' and that at a certain point in deflation tumble over in a heap with a little squeak. Lady Deering began to cry bitterly. She covered her leathery old face with her hands, and bent forward.



The mustard leaves fell on the carpet and were scattered.

Esmé jumped out of bed. She ran across the floor to Lady Deering, and wrapped her arms round her. 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she cried impulsively. 'I didn't mean to hurt you.'

'You are cruel . . . cruel . . . ' Lady Deering, who was not appeased, declared. 'And I have tried to be kind to you—to help you. I have tried to show you a mother's love for Jack's sake. . . . '

Lady Deering wept on, becoming somewhat more boisterous as her self-pity cooled and her temper rose again. Esmé stole back to her bed, fearing another onslaught. Esmé was no coward, but drugs really did make a coward of her—they had made a coward of her ever since she was quite a little child. She could not help it ; but neither could she easily forgive any one for having exposed her weakness.

Lady Deering was drying her tears and re-inflating herself gradually, when there came a gentle tap at the door. Immediately after the tap the door was pushed open a little, and a fat hand thrust round it into the room. The fat hand held a large and beautiful pear. Esmé wriggled at the sight, for she recognised the hand.

'Can you reach it ? ' came a husky whisper from the other side of the door . . . and then : 'All the policemen are in the drawing-room, so you needn't be frightened, little Esmé. Come and catch it.'

It was only Lord Deering being facetious.

Lady Deering sprang towards the door like the hero of a melodrama, disclosing the eavesdropping villain. She flung the door wide open.

## CHAPTER XIV

### LITTLE FOOL

LORD DEERING said 'Blow me tight' before he had time to think that that was a stupid opening for the conversation. Then he stood with his big mouth hanging wide and his eyes rolling. His hands fell down to his sides, so that the pear looked like a bomb ready to be thrown at Lady Deering. Esmé saw all that quite distinctly. What Esmé did not see, could not see, was Lady Deering's face.

Then Lady Deering's voice said :

'Archibald ! What is the meaning of this ?'

Archibald did not know what the meaning of it was. That was his trouble. His lips moved, but he did not succeed in conveying any information. Esmé saw Lady Deering's back stiffen up like a snake's back when the creature is about to strike. It moved away into the opening of the doorway, and Lord Deering's face moved away in front of it into the outer gloom.

And then the door shut.

Esmé lay down. She wondered whether she ought to laugh or cry. She did neither in the end. There was no sound from the other side of the door, so evidently Lord Deering and Lady Deering had gone away. Esmé got out of bed to extinguish the light. She saw then, scattered across the floor, her enemies the mustard leaves. She picked them up one by one, and held them in her hands as a man holds a snake he has killed. She put them away deliberately in the bottom of one of her drawers.

When she got back to bed she couldn't sleep. Sleep and a half-quenched indignation are impossible bed-fellows. A dull rage that this woman should have been able to inflict such humiliation on her glowed and fumed. Lady Deering's tears, too, had made matters much worse.

That feeling, however, did not last long; Esmé was quite useless as a chafing-dish of malice. After a short stay on the chilly summits of self-sufficiency and self-esteem she descended more or less quickly to the heated but invigorating valley of bad temper. Her indifference to Lady Deering melted very quickly in this dull atmosphere. She grew active; she felt a sharp desire, like sudden thirst, to humiliate Lady Deering, to hurt her, to shame her. She lay-gazing into the darkness of the room wondering how she could hurt, and shame, and humiliate Lady Deering.

Lady Deering's false attitude to life, her ridiculous pretence that she was Highland, the kilts and the bag-pipes, her hateful adoration of what she longed to believe was her 'caste,' her simpering regard for people like the Admiral and the Judge and the Cabinet Minister . . . these things screamed through Esmé's mind. She thought she would like to tell the whole dinner-table how she ridiculed and despised all this tomfoolery. She thought she would enjoy slapping the Cabinet Minister's face, or boxing his ears, or something just to see Lady Deering's anger and consternation, and Jack's anger and consternation.

At this point, however, her Imp jumped inside of Esmé, and she began to laugh. She laughed all her temper away, and was sorry, and then she fell asleep and dreamed that she stood on a mountain-top where the winds passed with drawn swords like warriors in procession, and the sunlight was gold under their feet. Tourntourq was with her on the summit, and the sunlight fell upon his brows.



But as she watched him a mist came and wrapped him from her sight. Only the huge form of him was visible to her then, looming in the mist. She saw the fabric of the mist woven about his throat and his arms, and she heard his voice calling.

His voice swelled until the winds were filled with it, and the arches of the skies echoed its tones. He was commanding, reassuring . . . rallying. Esmé felt herself compelled by the tones of his voice, so that her desire was to follow him. She heard him speak in his gentle, compelling tones of strange lands to which he summoned her; emerald fields girdled them; flowers drenched with dew blossomed there, and the dew in the flower-cups and on the petals of the flowers was like diamonds, and rubies, and topazes, and beryls, and amethysts. . . . And there were other lands he promised, that were dark, as dull as jade, and rivers flowed there that were swift like pain. In these lands was grief—the beating of wings. . . . And there were other lands where ships came with rent sails and warriors, whose armour was heavy with battle, and stained, and tarnished.

She awoke with a start. The morning sun was shining wholesomely through the open window. She jumped out of bed and looked out of the window, and a Rambler rose, cool with night dews, touched her lips, spilling its perfume on them. . . .

A maid brought her chocolate at eight, and she told the maid she would not go down to breakfast. Her breakfast was brought to her at nine. Then she heard a motor-car drive up to the door, and looked out in time to see Tourntourq get out of it. Tourntourq had a gun-case in his hand. A little later Dalgleish came. The house grew merry with men's voices after that, and Esmé listened contentedly to the sound. Soon she heard the sound grow fainter, and the crunch of boots on the gravel behind the house as the shooting party climbed

away up to the moors. The house became very still.

She jumped out of bed and filled her own bath, because she preferred to help herself. She stood beside her bath for minutes looking down at her own reflection in the water. The room was full of sunlight, and the scent of roses, and the sound of rippling waves.

She began to dream again, looking down at her face in the bath, and the same tangle of words and ideas which had made up her dream of the night before crowded her mind . . . words and ideas expressing incoherently a kind of miasma of the senses, the same kind of words and ideas that Tourntourq used when he was pouring out one of his queer speeches.

She started out of the dream suddenly, and began to laugh at herself. Then she tilted her shoulders in a mock despair. Because it seemed almost as if he had been in the room beside her. She glanced round the room quickly. She cried: 'What a little fool I am.'

## CHAPTER XV

### THE IMP

LADY DEERING and Jennie and Mabel and Jack—on a fat pony because of his ankle—went up to the moor to join the shooting party at luncheon, and so Esmé had the house to herself when she came downstairs. She lunched by herself in the big dining-room, and enjoyed the meal for its very silence. There is a peculiar satisfaction in possessing, even for a little while, the houses of one's foes.

After luncheon she felt soothed and happy because Lady Deering had a very good cook. Her coffee too had been just right, and she had sipped a curaçoa, which seemed to tickle up the Imp. Impishness came upon her, the kind of impishness which would have tweaked Lady Deering's nose if the opportunity had offered.

The afternoon was sunny, and clear, and delightful, and she decided to go for a walk. She never even thought about Jack, or what effect all this trouble was likely to have on her relations with him. Jack was rapidly becoming a kind of practical joke.

She went up to her bedroom to get her hat, and on the way passed the bedroom of the Cabinet Minister. His bedroom was open, and Esmé saw his evening clothes laid out on the bed—big, scraggy evening clothes, like the Cabinet Minister himself.

She thought how uncomfortable it must be to wear clothes like that, and then, suddenly, the Imp gave her a prod inside which made her gasp. She caught hold of the stair-rail, and half leaned on it. Her lips



were parted, and her face and her eyes seemed to sparkle with small, wicked thrills of joy.

Esmé went slowly up to her bedroom. She sat down on the bed, and tried quite honestly to make the Imp behave itself, and be quiet. But not a bit of it! The Imp was out for mischief this time, just as if somebody was tickling it in the ribs. Perhaps it was the curaçoa, for Esmé almost never drank liqueurs. At any rate there was no holding it now, and she gave it up very soon as a bad job.

She went to the drawer where she had hidden the mustard leaves, and she slipped the mustard leaves out as furtively as a bad bank clerk abstracts notes from the safe. Her eyes were distinctly naughty (it is no use quarrelling with that word because it exactly describes what her eyes were like), and her hand shook a little. She took out three of the leaves, and they threatened in her hands; a fine dust of mustard fell from them onto the carpet, making small dark whorls in the sunlight. She went softly out of the room to the door of the Cabinet Minister's room.

The Imp was still, tremulous with anticipation.

## CHAPTER XVI

### ' IN GOD'S SIGHT '

ESMÉ walked down the long carriage-way under the pine trees and came to the shore. It was a gentle autumn afternoon, and the loch smiled in little ripples to her feet. She amused herself by throwing flat stones into the water, edgeways, and watching them 'skip.' The Imp was quite still now, and she had almost forgotten what she had done. Esmé never remembered trouble.

She had amused herself only a few minutes, when she heard a voice behind her, and the rushing sound of feet on the shingle. Next moment Hal Newlands stood beside her, hatless, and breathing hard.

'Oh,' he cried, 'I saw you from the road. I came over to meet Dalgleish. You won't be very angry if I wait here instead of up at the house?'

Hal was laughing, but Esmé saw that he was laughing to hide his shyness. She thought that his shyness was delightful—like his youth. She wondered vaguely if there were really such things as youth and age, or if these were not merely names for distinct personalities which time and accident linked together.

'Of course,' she said, 'I'm awfully glad to have you. I'm all alone. In fact, I'm a naughty girl who has been sent to Coventry. There were ructions last night, and I'm not quite sure whether Jack will ever speak to me again. But tell it not in Gath.'

'What!' said Hal, with his eyes wide open, and

his hat swinging nervously in his hands. ‘ Surely . . . oh, I ’m so sorry.’

‘ No . . . I think I ’m rather glad.’

Esmé’s expression told Hal that he was much too much of a boy to understand these matters. But Hal was much too much in love with Esmé not to make a good attempt.

‘ Glad ? ’

‘ Yes, why not ? ’

‘ But ; . . . but you ’re going to marry him, aren’t you ? ’

Hal pronounced the word ‘ marry ’ as if it meant unspeakable happiness.

‘ I ’m not sure . . . I don’t know. I say, don’t let’s talk about these dull things—marriage, I mean. Come and help me to skip stones, or race me along the shore, or something . . . something interesting. . . .’

Esmé’s voice grew a little undecided at the end, because Hal’s face was so full of pain and dismay. Hal was sitting on a rock now, looking up in her face, and she could see deep into his clear eyes. They were quite . . . quite guileless. He looked at her in silence for a moment, and then she saw the blood come up slowly into his cheeks.

‘ Oh, surely,’ he cried, ‘ you don’t mean what you say . . . Esmé ’ (he blushed again when he said Esmé). ‘ Surely you can’t mean that you would marry a man you didn’t love ? ’

‘ Really,’ said Esmé, ‘ you are . . . oh, I don’t know what you are . . . young, I think . . . you are young, you know.’

Esmé was half annoyed and half pleased, and rather uncomfortable. Hal was big enough, but he couldn’t obviously be a man yet. The idea of being scolded by a schoolboy was rather too bizarre to be amusing. On the other hand Hal’s adoration shone. . . .

‘ That doesn’t matter a bit. I don’t believe that



being young is the slightest handicap in these matters, really. It is only said to be because youngsters are more honest and braver than older people, and that is awkward. I know what love means quite well . . . as well as if I had lived hundreds of years.'

'What does love mean?' Esmé asked cheerfully.

'It means . . .' he stopped so abruptly that his breath caught in a gasp. The exact meaning of love, now that he knew it, frightened him. But with the impulse of the cornered to escape he finished his sentence, blurting out the truth.

'It means *you*.'

Esmé laughed till Hal's cheeks were blazing, but there was no cruelty in her laughter.

'My dear Hal, you are quite ridiculous. I think you are perfectly and completely charming.'

'I am perfectly and completely in earnest.'

'But everybody is in earnest at seventeen. At seventeen I loved my music-master so much that I couldn't sleep all night for hoping he would ask me to run away with him . . . and he didn't. . . . And now . . .'

Hal cut her short. He cried :

'But I am not you. . . .'

His eyes were still shining. Esmé knew what it felt like to be worshipped. A queer inclination to let him kiss her came suddenly. It was the first time in her life she had ever been conscious of a real wish to be kissed. And she wasn't in the least annoyed with herself.

'Poor wee sonnie,' she said gaily.

She saw him quiver at her voice. The sight was unexpected but delightful. She added :

'Let's go for a walk . . . I'm tired of the sea, anyhow.'

They went up into the pine woods where the air was sweet with the smell of resin and the indefinable fragrance that belongs to great trees. Hal's cheeks

were still very much flushed ; he was still, Esmé observed, all a-quiver with excitement. She sat down on a carpet of pine needles, and allowed him to sit beside her. She smiled at him a little mockingly.

‘ Will you be very, very sad when I am married to Jack ? ’ she asked.

‘ You will never be married to Jack. O Esmé, you told me you didn’t love him. Think what it means to give yourself to a man you don’t love. . . . Promise me . . . ’

‘ Of course I won’t promise you, silly boy.’

‘ Esmé, you shall promise me . . . after all, you ’re only two years older than I am.’

‘ I am a hundred years older than you are. I feel like your mother.’

‘ Esmé, in a minute I ’ll . . . ’

Hal didn’t wait the minute. He flung his long arms round Esmé in a gesture that made her gasp, and kissed her on her lips, as a suppliant worshipper kisses an ikon.

‘ Now,’ he declared, ‘ now, you *can’t* marry Jack Deering.’

Esmé patted at the creases in her frock which his adoration had made.

‘ And why not ? ’ she asked.

‘ What ! Because that is sacred.’

‘ My sweet boy, you are . . . I don’t know . . . charming, I think. . . . ’

‘ Esmé, you belong to me in God’s sight.’

‘ But not in anybody else’s sight.’ Esmé got up. ‘ I’m going back to the house now,’ she said ; ‘ and if you come you must promise me not to make a scene, or a fuss, or anything.’

## CHAPTER XVII

### SAINTS, MARTYRS, AND FAIRIES

WHEN Hal and Esmé reached the house the shooting party had just returned. Tourntourq and Dalglish were in the hall with Jack Deering. The Cabinet Minister, and the Admiral, and the Judge were upstairs.

As soon as Esmé appeared Jack came to her, and his possessive manner made Hal hot and cold all over.

‘Esmé, dear,’ he cried, ‘I do hope you are better.’ He added in a lower tone when Esmé assured him she was all right, ‘I was awfully sorry about last night. Poor mother was so worried. . . . I think you were rather hard on mother, Esmé.’

‘Do you?’ said Esmé, eyeing Jack with disfavour.

‘Esmé . . . it wounds me very much when you behave like this.’

Esmé did not reply. She moved across to Dalglish and held out her hand.

‘Of course you don’t take any notice of me,’ she said, ‘you horrid old bachelor man.’

‘Forgive me . . . but you were so very much occupied.’

‘Oh . . .’ said Esmé, with her little tilt. . . . She turned to Tourntourq. ‘And you . . .?’

‘Am waiting,’ he said, ‘to see what you will do next.’

He spoke with a good-humoured smile. But Esmé started at his words. Somehow this man always startled her. What did he mean? Surely he could not have seen her with Hal. . . . She found herself fencing and asking :



‘And what if I don’t do anything?’

‘Then I shall wait a little longer.’

Jack stood by listening, with a look of stupid surprise on his face . . . a puzzled look that suggested that he was ready to do his duty as an angry man if he could be sure that he had cause to be angry. And Hal stood further away with his eyes full of suspicion of Tourntourq.

‘You think,’ said Esmé, ‘that I am bound to do something to amuse you in the end?’

Esmé went away to take off her hat. Tourntourq glanced at Jack Deering, and then at Hal. Tourntourq watched Hal quietly for a few minutes. At last he said :

‘I think we promised each other some metaphysics the last time we met, didn’t we? You wanted to tell me that you didn’t believe in fairies or something.’

Hal was very much taken aback. He had been thinking about Esmé.

‘I do believe in fairies,’ he said vehemently.

‘The last time it was saints and martyrs, young man! Don’t say you’ve fallen in love since then. . . .’

Tourntourq was quizzical. Hal winced. He was just going to say that he had fallen in love. . . . Hal had no sense of shame as yet . . . when Lady Deering appeared and spared him the necessity. Lady Deering had evidently just emerged from a hot bath. She looked plastic in a tea-gown.

‘My dear Dalglish,’ she cried, ‘what is this I hear? You are not going to stay to dinner. But surely . . .’

‘I can’t,’ said Dalglish; ‘I promised Lacourt weeks ago that I’d dine there on the 12th. I’m taking Hal with me, because Mrs. Vericker is coming to you.’

‘Oh, I *am* disappointed.’

Lady Deering wriggled affectionately. When expressing her social feelings she was like a collie dog.

She conveyed the same uneasy suggestion of an early and sudden bite.

'Where's Esmé?' she asked Jack. 'I believe she's better now.'

'She's gone up to take her hat off.'

'Esmé and I had such a quarrel last night,' Lady Deering told the men. 'I wanted to put a mustard leaf on her chest after the wetting you gave her' (this to Tourntourq) 'and the poor dear child nearly had a fit. I'm afraid I frightened her very much. Some people have such a strange fear of drugs.'

Lady Deering spoke in a fribbly voice that was meant to be all lightsome tinkles. But the bell had a crack in it. You could hear Lady Deering's exasperation hissing like a boiling kettle.

'My dear Lady Deering,' Tourntourq said, 'all drugs are an invention of the devil.'

The Cabinet Minister came down then and launched at once into a discussion of the reasons why he had missed so many birds. He seemed to have saved up a large number of reasons. Lord Deering, who followed him into the room, got the host's share of this *apologia*. Jack Deering went to his mother who was beginning to pour out tea. Lady Deering said:

'You aren't looking well, Jack dear. . . . Has your foot been hurting you a great deal? I don't think you should have gone out to-day.'

'It isn't my foot,' said Jack miserably.

'I know,' Lady Deering said. 'It's Esmé. I wish . . .'

Lady Deering checked herself because her wish was so direct that she felt she had better wait upon the time. She glanced up with a far-away look in her eyes, and saw Esmé come into the room. Esmé had wound her hair in great broad bands round her head. She wore a white blouse with golden braids on it. Jack gave a little gasp.

Esmé crossed to Dalgleish, who was standing alone,

Tourntourq having joined the Cabinet Minister, and Dalglish welcomed her.

'You know,' he said, 'I believe I owe you a grudge. . . . My poor Hal. What have you done to the boy?'

Esmé started and flushed. Could Hal possibly have . . . but no, that was impossible. She laughed.

'What nonsense you do talk,' she said.

'Hal is a really good boy. . . . I beseech you to deal tenderly with him. Love means the first time all the time, remember . . . the other times are . . . echoes.'

'How interesting . . . to be echoed down a man's life. . . . Hal is charming. I am in love with him, really.'

'Hush!' said Dalglish, who saw Lady Deering craning her neck.

'Dalglish,' said Esmé suddenly and anxiously, 'you don't really think I ought to, do you?'

'How should I know, my dear child?'

'But you do know. Somehow, ever since I met you I've felt you would be a friend. I don't know why. You're kind, perhaps, and not very enthusiastic. Enthusiastic people are always selfish. You're the sort of man a woman trusts and comes back to. . . .'

'A kind of human sofa, in fact.'

'No, don't be frivolous. A kind of father confessor who will be a little angry—but not too angry—with naughtiness. . . . You know what I mean—who understands it.'

'Oh, I should be very angry with naughtiness . . . if you hurt my poor Hal, for example.'

'How could I hurt him?'

'I'm afraid, by looking at him. He is in distress at this very moment.'

'But that isn't my fault. . . . Am I a sort of sugar-cake that everybody wants to eat?'



‘That is one of the penalties of prettiness, I think.’

Esmé sighed, rather contentedly. ‘I suppose so,’ she said. ‘But it has its compensations. Tourn-tourq told me a woman’s face was a window into heaven.’

‘Possibly in some cases her character may be the blind behind the window.’

Dalgleish smiled ; but his eyes were kind to Esmé. She turned away. Her eyes met those of Tourn-tourq. Tourntourq was watching her with his quiet, rather mocking smile.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE RIGHT WORD

DALGLEISH and Hal walked home to Dalgleish Castle through the woods which belt all the loch shores. Hal was moody and silent, and answered Dalgleish's remarks about the day's shooting in monosyllables. Evidently his enthusiasm of yesterday for rod and gun had evaporated almost as quickly as it had arisen. Dalgleish had made up his mind to discourage any attempt at confidence with vigour, because it was a part of his creed to refuse to take what he called 'sickly sentimentality' seriously.

However, Hal did not attempt to discuss Esmé. He was much too excited to be able to, even if he had felt an inclination. And he was also too anxious, because he had noticed how coolly Tourntourq took the girl for granted, and how she allowed Tourntourq to take her for granted. Hal knew no more of Tourntourq than he had been told, but his attempt to cross swords with the man had left him with a feeling of having been laughed at, which hurt his vanity.

'I dislike that fellow Tourntourq very much,' he told Dalgleish.

Hal's voice was steady enough, but it thrilled a little and gave him away. Dalgleish smiled.

'I have always rather thought,' he said, 'that his reputation as a seer was undeserved. Mind you, boy,' he added, 'I don't say that I think you were well-advised to butt-in in the way you did yesterday.'

Again they walked in silence. Hal's restlessness

was evident in every gesture, but he did try to control it as best he could. Pangs of regret at the way he had behaved to Esmé chased fears that she, on consideration, might come to resent his behaviour, through his mind.

They turned a bend in the road. A girl was coming towards them on a bicycle. She recognised Dalgleish, and dismounted. In the gathering darkness it was still possible to see what a fine supple figure she had.

'O Dalgleish,' she cried, 'father sent me up to tell you that he can't get the Red Band for the Territorial Ball next month. He heard to-day. And as you're the colonel of the regiment, will you suggest some other band?'

'My dear Nannie, I'm afraid I know so little about bands,' Dalgleish said. He turned with a smile to Hal:

'This is Mr. Hal Newlands, Miss Nannie M'Clure. And I feel quite certain that what Hal doesn't know about dancing and bands isn't worth knowing. . . . There's your chance, Nannie. Why not get Hal to do my part of the business. He's going to stay here till long after the dance.'

Nannie looked at Hal with the eye of an expert, as a man looks at a horse he thinks of putting money on. Hal pleased her, and yet somehow failed to please her completely. She laughed:

'Oh, I should think that would be a very good idea,' she said. She turned to Hal. 'There are a lot of arrangements to be made and things. . . . Will you come down to the Drill Hall at Tourntourq the day after to-morrow afternoon? I'll be there. We can talk things over, and you can put some of your new London dances in the programme, if you like. . . . the Tango, isn't it? And the Fox Trot, and . . .'

She laughed merrily, leaning back from the bicycle.

'And what about the band?' said Dalgleish.



'Well there's Walker's band at Greenock,' Nannie declared. 'They wear red coats . . . two violins and a 'cello, and of course piano . . .'

'Excellent. Walker's it shall be. Hal, as Master of Ceremonies, I bid you note that Walker's is the band.'

'You'll come to the Drill Hall?' said Nannie, addressing Hal.

'Oh, really . . . I . . . I don't know . . . you see . . .'

'Of course he'll come,' said Dalgleish. 'You leave that to me, Nannie.'

Dalgleish laughed again, enjoying Hal's discomfiture. And Nannie laughed. Hal glanced at Nannie shyly, and saw how pretty she was. He thought how pretty she was, and then his cheeks reddened with vexation, because was not this an act of treachery against Esmé?

Nannie said, 'Good-bye, Dalgleish, good-bye, Mr. Newlands. I shall expect you at four o'clock, and I promise to give you some tea when you come. . . .'

She rode away under the trees.

'Wonderful girl that for a shopkeeper's daughter,' said Dalgleish; 'awfully pretty, too, don't you think?'

'Oh yes,' said Hal indifferently, 'but, really, you know, Dalgleish, you shouldn't have let me in for this business. It isn't fair, because I don't understand anything about dances, and evidently she . . . they take it pretty seriously.'

He lit a cigarette. His face was very solemn, and it seemed to grow more solemn. Dalgleish chuckled.

They reached the castle. Mrs. Vericker was waiting for them. She took Dalgleish away to tell him her news. She had been to the Lacourts. Dulcie Lacourt had told her that Tourntourq had broken off their engagement.

'The poor child is hysterical,' Mrs. Vericker added.

'She doesn't seem able to realise, even yet. And it happened yesterday.'

Dalglish's face grew hard. 'I thought something of the kind would happen,' he said, 'after what happened on the pier the other day.'

'You mean the red-haired girl?'

'Yes.'

'But the red-haired girl is engaged to Jack Deering, isn't she, still?'

'She was this morning, I believe.'

'Oh, so that's the way the wind blows, is it? I suppose this is his "dream girl" come to life at last. . . . In fact, poor, dear Dulcie said it was. Dulcie believes all his rant. She's quite incorrigible.'

'Quite,' said Dalglish. He added: 'I would like to give the fellow a thrashing, Olive. I believe if he was knocked about a bit. . . . You know he had the red-haired girl up at his place all afternoon yesterday. The result was that she got wet through, and had to go to bed. Lady Deering tried to doctor her, and then there was a row. Now they're all at sixes and sevens. Wherever that fellow goes there's trouble. Probably by this time she'll have quarrelled so badly with Jack Deering that Lady Deering will ask her to pack her boxes.'

Dalglish walked up and down the room frowning. Mrs. Vericker sat and watched him, and thought that he at least was sane in this crazy place. She congratulated herself that Hal was staying with him and not with Tourntourq. There was no saying what sort of a bad influence Tourntourq might not have exercised over the boy.

'What is the attraction of the red-headed girl?' she asked; 'I confess I couldn't see it. She's pretty, of course, but not nearly as distinguished as Dulcie. Dulcie has more character in her little finger than the red-headed girl in her whole body!'

There was just a trace of viciousness in Mrs.

Vericker's tones. Dalglish heard it and passed it by. He stopped in his walking and came to her.

'Perhaps a woman would not find her attractive,' he admitted cautiously, 'but I think she is attractive. Emptiness often is, you know . . . that kind of childish emptiness.'

'I should certainly not call her empty, Dalglish.'

'No, it isn't the right word, I admit. I don't quite know how to describe it.'

He thought for a moment. 'I suppose it's really absolute impishness,' he said at last.

'Just the quality to attract Tourntourq—and other children.'

Dalglish nodded. Then he thought of Dulcie, and looked angry again. Dulcie appealed to him strongly, and the contrast between her and Esmé, which was now forced on his mind, intensified the appeal. One could never imagine Esmé's face surrounded by cherubs.

Mrs. Vericker said: 'I seem to have seen very little of Hal since he came. You have monopolised him, you know.'

'I like him.'

Her eyes softened. 'I'm so glad,' she exclaimed. 'Hal needs a friend like you. I fancy he's inclined to be rather morbid. Only sons without sisters so often are. And he's sentimental—more so than I thought. He wants to be laughed at in a decent way, and taught to discount a good deal of his emotionalism.' She added after a pause: 'You can't think how much I appreciate your goodness, dear Dalglish, in taking the boy under your wing.'



## CHAPTER XIX

WHEN YOU CARE TO SAY 'YES'

THE Deering dinner-party, Mrs. Vericker thought, was duller even than she had expected. Moreover, in spite of all the display, there was an uncomfortable feeling that things were being done on the cheap. The food was well cooked, but it was not good food. A feeling of constraint seemed to be on the company, and even the Admiral lacked his usual enthusiasm.

Mrs. Vericker employed herself watching Esmé in the intervals between answering Lord Deering's questions—which related mainly to local news. Esmé was sitting opposite her, between the Admiral and the Judge. The Cabinet Minister was on Mrs. Vericker's other side; he had Jennie Deering for a partner. She saw that Esmé was watching Tourn-tourq almost as closely as she was watching Esmé. Esmé's eyes became wistful every time that she raised them to look at Tourntourq.

Mrs. Vericker wondered why. And then she thought of what Dalgleish had said about the girl, and concluded that Dalgleish had not comprehended her character at all.

Lord Deering did his duty as a host by firing off remarks at intervals. One of these, which was addressed to the Cabinet Minister, was to the effect that the only Christmas box he coveted was a ballot-box.

Lord Deering was immensely pleased with this sally. His political opinions were few and simple, but he held them strongly. One of them was that Radical

Ministers never thought about anything but votes. He had read this on one occasion in the *Globe* during a visit to London, and had agreed with it instantly, as every man agrees with what he has believed for years when he sees it in print. Moreover, the *Morning Post*, which he read in his bed the next morning, had confirmed every word that the *Globe* had said. Many and many a time since Lord Deering had delighted himself by declaiming in public that Radical Ministers never thought about anything but votes.

'Ah no,' said the Judge, 'you do our friend Merri-dew an injustice. . . . He isn't nearly as fond of ballot-boxes as you suppose. Why, the present Government has been in office—how many years?'

The Cabinet Minister had his glass replenished with champagne. He seemed to be a little uneasy. He drank with a speed that was foreign to his habit.

The Admiral meanwhile was amusing himself by paying Esmé what he took to be subtle compliments. She laughed at each of them, and there was a note of excitement in her laughter which the morose atmosphere of the table as a whole did not warrant. Probably that accounted for the redness of her cheeks and the sparkle in her eyes. Mrs. Vericker overheard her tell the Admiral that she never could resist the funny side of anything, no matter how serious it was.

Her remarks, however, did not find a very attentive audience. The Admiral was looking across the table at the Cabinet Minister with some alarm in his face. Esmé followed the Admiral's glance, and immediately gave a gasp of interest.

'Look at Merridew,' the Admiral whispered, 'he's ill or something.'

The Cabinet Minister did not appear to be ill, but he was moving in his chair in a most peculiar fashion, like a man with St. Vitus's dance. Every now and

then at short intervals he would give a quick wriggle sideways, and then he would pass his hand behind his chair and seem to raise himself in his seat.

‘Oh, he’s stiff probably,’ whispered Esmé. ‘Didn’t he shoot an enormous number of birds to-day?’

The Admiral kept looking at the Cabinet Minister, who was getting more and more restless every minute, and was beginning to stare in an unwholesome way across the table, as though he wanted somebody to tell him that he was all right. Esmé watched too, with parted lips and eyes wide-open, like a child’s when it sees something strange and very interesting. . . . The Cabinet Minister wriggled himself up the back of his chair into a half-standing position. His face got rather paler than it had been, and sweat came out on his brow. The drops of sweat shone in the lamplight. . . .

‘Good heavens!’ the Admiral said, ‘he *is* ill. . . .’

The Admiral shouted out, ‘I say, Merridew, old man, you’re ill . . . Merridew’s ill, Deering. . . .’

The Admiral’s shout did it. The Cabinet Minister stood right up in his place as stiff as a poker, with his hands gripping at his coat-tails and his lips moving incoherently. He gave a groan that horrified the whole company, and brought Lord Deering jumping to his side. Then he slipped down again into his chair, and jumped up again even quicker than he had sat down.

‘It’s nothing . . . it’s nothing,’ he said in hoarse tones.

But it was obvious that it was something.

‘Sit down . . . sit down,’ said Lord Deering, putting his hand on the Cabinet Minister’s shoulder to guide him back to his chair. . . . ‘Sit down, old man, and have a nip of brandy.’

‘I . . . I can’t sit down.’

A look of great alarm crossed Lady Deering’s face.

‘Lockjaw,’ she was heard to say in hollow tones.



The Cabinet Minister opened his mouth, and shut it again. It opened quite easily. He yielded to Lord Deering's entreaties and pressure, and very warily lowered himself to his seat.

But he bounded up from it. . . .

'Oh, my God . . . ' he cried.

Serious anxiety was on every face, and the whole party crowded round the Cabinet Minister to support him in the only position in which he seemed to find any relief. Lord Deering shouted to a footman to bring brandy. Lady Deering hurried from the room to make arrangements for the Cabinet Minister's bed. She ordered the car to be sent at once for Dr. MacGregor. She came back to the dining-room with a glass of hot milk.

The Cabinet Minister was still standing up as stiff as a poker as if he was posing for his statue. He had the tense, powerful look of a statue, too, the 'never-looked-behind-but-marched-breast-forward' look. Only he didn't march: he couldn't. And he wouldn't let anybody touch him or lift him, because that brought on the pain again in a moment. When Lady Deering suggested the immediate application of a mustard leaf his face lit up dreadfully, and he yelled:

'No! Oh, my God! Don't touch me.'

It was difficult to know what to do with the Cabinet Minister, and, in spite of the anxiety every one experienced, a certain impatience began to manifest itself, because it was felt that the Cabinet Minister could not go on standing like a statue for ever. Mrs. Vericker glanced round the room to see how those who had not at once come to the rescue were taking things. She saw that only Tourntourq and Esmé had not come to the rescue. Tourntourq was still sitting at the table. Esmé was bending whispering to Tourntourq. Esmé, Mrs. Vericker thought, looked a little frightened.

And then a most remarkable thing happened. Tourntourq rose to his feet and came to where the Cabinet Minister was. He whispered in the Cabinet Minister's ear. The Cabinet Minister's face flushed suddenly like a tropical dawn. He gave a yell. 'Mustard . . . mustard in my clothes. . . . Who did it ?'

He glanced wildly round the room. And then he seemed to collect his wits again. He bolted out of the door like a frightened cat. Lady Deering shrieked :

'A mustard leaf . . . oh, who dared to do such a thing in my house ?'

She stared round the company fiercely like a witch-doctor surveying a mob of victims. The company quailed before her eye. Lady Deering's eye came to Esmé :

'I put it there,' said Tourntourq imperturbably, with his cool smile.

'You !'

Lady Deering swept round on him.

'Well, didn't you tell me you tried to put one on Esmé last night ? If you put them on my friends, Lady Deering, I wonder why I shouldn't try to put them on yours ?'

There was a silence. Nobody seemed capable of answering that conundrum.

When the excitement caused by it had ebbed away a little, and just when nobody could foresee what would happen next, Lady Deering said :

'Will you please leave my house, Tourntourq . . . at once.'

Lady Deering was pale and she shook. Mrs. Vericker thought that she had never see any one so angry. A feeble protest from Lord Deering earned him a look which caused his mouth to fall open.

Tourntourq bowed. He passed towards the door. His smile never wavered. Every one watched him

with great interest. When he came to where Esmé was standing he held out his hand.

Esmé did not take his hand. Instead she turned to Lady Deering. The Imp twinkled wickedly in her eyes. She cried out :

'Lady Deering, it wasn't Tourntourq at all. It was me. I did it because of the way you behaved last night.' She began to laugh.

'Lamentable,' said Tourntourq sadly. He addressed Esmé : 'In the circumstances, my dear child . . .'

Lady Deering asked : 'Is this true, Esmé ?'

'Quite true.'

Esmé stood reckless between her laughter and many tears. The Imp was in full possession now. Tourntourq, beside her, surveyed the company cheerfully. There was scarcely a sound to be heard in the room. At last Tourntourq said to Jack Deering :

'Why don't you say something ?'

Jack Deering tried to speak, and didn't. Nor did he look at Esmé. She saw how he was taking the matter. She turned to Tourntourq. He gave her his hand. He bent and whispered to her, and then addressed the Judge.

'In Scots law, my dear sir,' he said, 'and I know you will correct me if I am wrong, when a man and a woman declare themselves husband and wife before witnesses, they are married.'

He paused. The Judge wiped his face.

'I'm hanged if I know anything about Scots law or mustard leaves either,' he declared hoarsely.

Jack Deering sprang up from his seat. 'No !' he shouted. He would have rushed at Tourntourq if his father and the Admiral had not held him back. Lady Deering said :

'Jack, dear, you have every reason to congratulate yourself.'

Tourntourq bowed.



‘Esmé, should you care to say “yes,” we’re married, I believe,’ he remarked; ‘the thing can be regularised before the Sheriff at Benmore to-morrow morning.’

He turned to Esmé.

The reckless look still burned in Esmé’s eyes, but impishness was mingled with it. She said, ‘Yes.’

## CHAPTER XX

‘GO AWAY!’

WHAT happened after Esmé said ‘Yes’ to Tourn-tourq’s proposal of marriage remained a confused memory even in Mrs. Vericker’s mind, and she was certainly the calmest person in the room. Not that there was much talk or expostulation. Every one seemed too startled to talk . . . even Lady Deering. But the air was full of all sorts of possibilities, and the general impression was mixed. However, one clear fact stood out. Tourntourq asked Mrs. Vericker in his politest manner if she would take Esmé into her house for the night until he was able to regularise their marriage before the Sheriff.

She agreed, of course, because it gave her an excuse to go home at once, and for other reasons. In a very few minutes she and Esmé were seated in her car, and in a few minutes more they were in her own drawing-room. All the way home neither of them spoke a word.

But in the drawing-room they had to speak. Mrs. Vericker began it. She demanded :

‘Was it he, or was it you, who did it?’

‘It was me,’ said Esmé.

Esmé still had the impish look in her eyes.

Mrs. Vericker nodded. She looked at Esmé with rather hostile eyes. ‘I suppose,’ she added, ‘that you realise that you are married to him.’

Esmé said: ‘I really don’t know what I realise.’

‘It is. . . . Goodness knows what it is . . .’ said

Mrs. Vericker hopelessly. . . . 'I feel as if I was living in a lunatic asylum.'

They sat looking at one another. Mrs. Vericker's anger gradually cooled away, and she grew sorry for Esmé. It was quite evident that Esmé's impishness was the cause of the trouble, but the trouble seemed out of proportion to its cause. No one could believe that Esmé had seriously meant to marry Tourntourq. And yet now she certainly would have to marry him, if she hadn't actually married him already. He had taken advantage of her very cleverly.

Mrs. Vericker told Esmé that she thought Tourntourq had taken advantage of her. But Esmé only laughed and shrugged her shoulders. She went on laughing. Mrs. Vericker looked at her, and wondered if life was really a comic opera business. She remembered Tourntourq's name for Esmé—'Dream Girl.' Perhaps he was right in this matter also. The thought of what Esmé might become as Tourntourq's wife was an uneasy one. Esmé did not represent the stuff that wives are made of.

'I think you are still only a child, Esmé,' she said.

Esmé nodded. 'Rather a bad child, perhaps, but I can't help it. I never seem to be able to help anything, really. And I always mean to be good. But the Imp gets me, you know, my little imp of laughter. It's then I feel I hate grown-up people so much . . .' She paused and added: 'Wouldn't it be lovely if one didn't grow up, and kiddies—and not great ugly men and women—could be the fathers and mothers of kiddies?—women, like Lady Deering, I mean, with kippered souls.'

'Some people don't grow old, you know.'

'No, that's true. Do you know, I believe the world is divided into two lots—the lot that stays kiddish, and the lot that doesn't.'



‘Do you think Hal is a kid?’ Mrs. Vericker asked with a smile. ‘You’ve met him, haven’t you?’

Esmé hesitated. The question seemed to trouble her.

‘Yes he is,’ she said at last, ‘but I don’t think he knows it—not yet. He’s a good kid, too . . . too good. Niall’s a kid, too,’ she added. ‘He is charming, isn’t he? There’s something rather wonderful about him. I don’t know why, but when he talks to me I seem to see quite wonderful things, and I want to run to them like a boy after a rainbow.’ She laughed and added: ‘I like him best like he was to-night. To-night he seemed to have a monocle in his soul, didn’t he?’

Mrs. Vericker did not reply. She had just discovered that she had left a diamond pin, one of her husband’s gifts, at the Deerings. A shade of annoyance crossed her face, which Esmé misinterpreted.

They heard steps approaching the house, and the door opened and shut. Dalglish and Hal entered the room. Mrs. Vericker rose from her chair, but Esmé didn’t rise. Hal gave a cry of delight and surprise when he saw Esmé.

Mrs. Vericker told them how it was that Esmé had come to her. She ended up her description, which was decidedly sketchy, by declaring that she didn’t really know whether Esmé was married to Tournourq or not.

Esmé laughed at that point.

Dalglish said nothing, and Hal said nothing. Hal, Mrs. Vericker saw, was as white as paper. He had an awful look. She was just going to say what an awful look he had when Dalglish silenced her with a glance. Dalglish went forward to Esmé.

‘It sounds pretty thrilling at any rate,’ he remarked dryly.

‘It was thrilling,’ said Esmé lightly.

Esmé did not like the hard look in Dalglish’s eyes.

But on the other hand she did not know that Dalglish had been spending the evening with Dulcie Lacourt, whom she had dispossessed.

Hal said to Mrs. Vericker: 'I think I'll go home at once. I . . . I feel sick.'

He went away before she could stop him. Dalglish took no notice of his departure. Esmé sighed when Hal went away. She was looking rather tired.

'You can't say I didn't warn you that something was going to happen,' she said to Dalglish.

Mrs. Vericker asked: 'Is it really true that marriages can be done that way? I simply refuse to believe it.'

'It is really true,' said Dalglish.

Esmé smiled. 'I knew he would marry me,' she said, 'the moment he looked at me. I simply can't fight against him, so why worry? Besides he behaved awfully well. I'm rather glad, really.'

Mrs. Vericker and Dalglish looked at one another. They were both solemn. Esmé watched them indifferently. She said 'good-night' to Dalglish when he went away, in casual tones.

But she didn't sleep well. She heard Mrs. Vericker go upstairs to bed, and heard her afterwards walking about upstairs on the creaky old floors. Whenever she fell asleep she dreamed about Hal, and each time she dreamed about him something horrible happened. The last time she felt herself falling over a cliff in his arms, and she woke with a jump and sat right up in bed, staring. Her bedroom opened on the tennis lawn, and she saw the lawn distinctly through the open French window.

After a time she lay down again, but now she couldn't sleep at all. And then a sound that was certainly not imaginary made her heart beat like a hammer. Somebody was coming into the room. She jumped up and lay down again with a cry of wonder.

Hal was standing in the room by the window. She felt an inclination to laugh suddenly.

Hal said : ‘Esmé, I had to come . . .’

He approached the bed on tip-toe. He knelt down beside the bed. She heard his boots scrape over the carpet. She lay still, wondering why this should give her so much pleasure as it did. Hal cried in a whisper :

‘Oh, how could I stay when I knew what danger you were in . . .’

Esmé closed her eyes. She did not answer him. He came nearer to her, and she felt his breath on her cheek.

‘Esmé,’ he whispered again. ‘O Esmé, it isn’t true . . . it isn’t . . . it can’t be . . .’

He took her hand ; he crushed it in his hands. Then he kissed it fervently. His hair as he bent to kiss it brushed her cheek. She whispered :

‘Please . . . please, you must go away at once.’

‘No—unless you come with me.’

She started : ‘Sonnie, don’t be silly . . .’

He answered her by putting his arms out across the bed. He declared :

‘I shall stay here. . . . And then your marriage, or whatever you call it, will never happen at all.’

He spoke with such conviction that Esmé began to feel frightened. She declared :

‘Hal, I don’t want to be brutal. But I . . . I was only playing, you know.’

‘As long as *he* doesn’t get you I don’t care,’ he said stoically.

It was exceedingly annoying, because Esmé felt that just at present she could not afford a scene of any sort. And the boy was as stubborn as could be. It seemed probable in the highest degree that he would stay there till he was discovered, and she was



discovered. She repented bitterly having allowed him to make love to her at all. She could feel him trembling, and his trembling made her angry.

But it was no use getting angry, because anger had not the slightest effect on him. It only seemed to harden his determination. No crusader, she thought, ever took his crusade more seriously.

‘Hal,’ she whispered, ‘do you want me to call for help and make a row? Because I will, if you don’t go away this instant.’

‘I don’t mind in the least what you do.’

‘Hal, sonnie, be sensible.’

‘I am sensible.’

The situation was ridiculous in the extreme, and Esmé felt the absurdity of it so much that she wanted to cry, or laugh, or box Hal’s ears, or do something. And she didn’t dare to do anything, because there was the awful fear that Mrs. Vericker might hear her, and come and find them. She didn’t know where Mrs. Vericker slept, but it could not be far away, because the house was not a big one, and the walls and floors were not thick enough to prevent you hearing people walking about. Hal was still kneeling by the bed, and he went on babbling about his love and his intention to shield her against the impending danger, even if he had to stay there the whole night. His voice was low but very intense, and she had the feeling that at any moment it might take on a lyrical quality and resound. . . . He looked like a knight keeping vigil. Don Quixote, she thought, with a gasp of angry mirth, did not look more foolish, standing sentinel by the water-trough.

‘Hal,’ she said fervently, ‘do you wish to get me into a frightful mess? Because you will, if you stay here. It is most cruel and disgraceful of you. I did think you were a gentleman.’

She managed to get a great deal of sarcasm into her voice, but the effort was not fruitful. Indeed, it bore

fruit of a very different kind from that which she had intended. Hal shook his head.

‘If I go away you ’ll marry him,’ he declared in a louder tone than he had yet used ; ‘I know you will. You are not able to refuse him. I saw that at the Deerings at tea. He has got some terrible influence over you, Esmé . . . some terrible, evil influence. You just have to do what he tells you. But he hasn’t got any influence over me, and I mean to shield you against him.’

He stood up, invigorated by his words. The moon shone upon his face, lighting up its zeal. Esmé watched him frantically : she could scarcely lie still. All kinds of schemes for getting rid of him crowded into her mind. She told him that being English she wasn’t subject to Scots law, and that therefore his anxiety was needless, but he refused to believe her, because Gretna Green lost its point if that was true. Then she said she would meet him in the morning and talk things over. He declared :

‘No . . . now. To-morrow my chance will be gone, and you will be under his influence again.’

His voice was so stern that she quailed, glancing uneasily towards the ceiling. At last she whispered :

‘Hal, how can I come with you if I don’t dress ; and how can I dress if you ’re here ?’

She saw him start at her words. He caught his breath.

‘Oh, I ’ll go into the garden if . . . if you ’ll promise . . .’

‘Go quick, then . . . because I ’m sure you ’ve made enough noise to . . .’

She sat up in bed. Hal glanced at her with shining eyes. But his caution did not desert him. He went to the open window and out by it, but he stood just on the threshold so that she could not close the window against him. He had his back turned to her.

Esmé got out of bed, and stood for a moment looking at his back that was slim and fine, like a girl's. She began to understand what it felt like to be under guard. And then a sudden, unexpected pity for him overwhelmed her. She felt the tears come into her eyes, and dashed them away with a sweep of her hand. She clenched her teeth together. . . . She moved forward stealthily to try and bolt the window behind him.

And just then the door of the room opened and Mrs. Vericker came in.



## CHAPTER XXI

‘ BUT WHAT SHALL WE DO FOR A RING ? ’

No one spoke for a considerable time. Then Mrs. Vericker said :

‘ Hal, what is the meaning of this ? ’

Mrs. Vericker’s voice sounded, Esmé thought, almost like Lady Deering’s voice when she asked the same question of Lord Deering in her bedroom. It was as sharp as a knife. Hal came back into the room. He cried :

‘ Olive, you’ve got to help me to save her.’ Hal’s voice was piteous. He did not seem to be thinking much about Mrs. Vericker. He crossed the floor towards her, and then stopped suddenly as if he feared that Esmé might bolt away from him out of the window. While he was hesitating Esmé managed to say :

‘ Please, please take him away. It’s been awful.’

‘ Are you both mad ? ’ Mrs. Vericker asked in the same chill tones.

‘ Very nearly,’ said Esmé.

Hal exploded then, and gave Mrs. Vericker a brisk outline of the reasons for his visit, which did not convince her. She looked so little convinced, that for the first time the boy saw his visit in a new light. Hot blushes rushed over his face—happily the moonlight dimmed their lustre; he began to assure Mrs. Vericker that he and he alone was the instigator in this business.

That convinced Mrs. Vericker rather less than his first explanation, and she glanced at Esmé with deep

hostility and suspicion in her eyes . . . the hostility and suspicion of a mother against the woman who has trifled with her boy. She declared :

‘ I ’m ashamed of you, Hal.’

She did not say what her feelings were towards Esmé. But there was no need. Esmé knew ; and Mrs. Vericker knew that Esmé knew. . . . They all became silent again. Hal was not nearly so like a young knight now. He was crestfallen and discouraged. But he did manage to repeat his declaration of intention to save Esmé from Tourntourq. That made Mrs. Vericker say :

‘ If you don’t go away this moment I will call the servants to put you out of the house ; . . . you are a ridiculous young fool. Hal . . . I ’m disgusted with you.’

Hal went away. Mrs. Vericker went back to bed after she had herself fastened the window. She did not speak to Esmé, and Esmé did not speak. Very soon after the house was quiet again, and Esmé fell asleep.

When she woke the dawn was spreading across the sky, and the voices of the sea and woodlands came to her. These voices spoke in stillness that has breathed upon the earth in summer dawnings since in great stillness the earth proceeded out of the soul of God.

She lay wondering about men, and her thoughts amused her, because she smiled often. All the men she knew, she thought, seemed to want so much the same thing. Jack Deering had proposed on the first evening of their acquaintance, and almost eaten her there and then. Tourntourq had kissed her . . . rather formally, it is true . . . the first time they were alone together. As for Hal . . . she sighed deeply. It could scarcely be herself they cared about, because they knew so very little about herself.

Esmé had her childhood’s logic still intact, and her

next thought was that, of the three, the only one who had aroused a desire to be kissed in herself was Hal. She concluded that Hal possessed some quality of appearance, like the quality of appearance she possessed, which had the power of waking up tender feelings.

She closed her eyes on this knowledge, and remembered Tourntourq’s remark that a woman’s face was a window into heaven. Was that the explanation? She laughed suddenly, but there was the gentleness of tears in her laughter.

Her child mood grew stronger, and that made her see the truth of her beauty clearer . . . with the deadly clearness of childhood that has not learned the urgent necessity of make-believe in serious things. She reviewed each of her lovers almost with relentless gaze. Tourntourq was the most interesting because of his queer gentleness, and that talk of his about youth and beauty, which had carried her away so strongly at the first glow. But he was not so near and sympathetic as Hal, who called her ‘Madonna,’ because her face made him see clearer into his heaven where sweet saints and gentle ladies were . . . Hal, who trembled so when he touched her, and writhed as if in bodily pain. And then Jack Deering? What did they want with her, all of them? She gave a little gasp because the thought of marriage had suddenly become stark and real. Before, she had just thought of it as a big picnic, with somebody not too disagreeable . . . rather a nice picnic, *tête-à-tête*, and lots of fun, and . . . But that could only be between children who liked each other. She saw that real marriage was a different kind of picnic . . . there might perhaps be three people at that picnic—a man, and a woman’s attractiveness, and a woman. Was that why so many marriages were unhappy . . . so few women would be able to play gooseberry to themselves. She almost choked with the idea: the



Siamese twins—she often had wondered how the Siamese twins conducted their love-making—were just nothing compared to this.

Her mind wandered back to the first occasion on which she had seen Tourntourq. She remembered every detail, and most clearly of all her own horror and rage when she saw Dulcie permit the lad to put his hands on her. She had not really got over that feeling even yet . . . certainly not as far as people like Jack Deering were concerned.

She jumped out of bed, and so doing caught sight of herself in the mirror. She paused to admire herself. 'You really are rather a dear?' she cried.

Out in the garden the young sun was full of laughter, and Esmé gave herself easily to his humour. Love seemed a thing of fires and candles in this daybreak, like a novel finished overnight. She experienced a sense of revulsion, a desire that this good air and this light might cleanse her mind of its heaviness. She dressed, and went out into the garden, and so through the coppices to the high road and the loch. The loch was very still, with a white sheen on its waters, that made a background for the gold of the sun poured out upon them in splendid flood. Rabbits scurried at her feet, jumping from rock to rock, very small baby rabbits mostly, because it was just after the breeding season. She smiled at the sight of the baby rabbits with their querulous air at a safe distance.

Then she sat down on one of the rocks and took her shoes off, and bathed her feet in the salt water, because it amused her to 'squigge' her toes among the seaweed. She sang a verse or two of a song she had heard in London, just before coming North, a silly, sentimental song with a lilt in it; but her singing came to a sudden end because her toes dislodged a small crab from among the seaweed. She chased the crab with her toes, and tickled it, and at last it

escaped. Then she found a big anemone with its rosy tentacles spread out to reveal the purple deeps encircled by them. She cried out in sheer joy at the beauty of the thing, and then must needs touch it with a prying finger to feel the quick softness of its closing.

Her cheeks were glowing now, and her hair, which she had scarcely done more to than tie in a knot, was all loose about her face. She laughed as she pushed back the wisps of hair that got in her eyes. For all the world was brimful of laughter. . . . A tremendous barefooted assault on a limpet, made with a sudden kick that hurt quite considerably, failed to dislodge the limpet. But the dog-whelks that got the next kick rolled in slow numbers into the water. . . . She sang :

‘The owl and the pussy cat went for a sail  
In a beautiful pea-green boat :  
They took some honey and plenty of money  
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.  
The owl looked up to the stars above  
And sang to a small guitar,  
“O beautiful pussy, O pussy, my love  
What a beautiful pussy you are . . . you are,  
What a beautiful pussy you are !”

Said Puss to the owl, “You elegant fowl,  
How charmingly sweetly you sing . . .”

A man’s voice behind her added the next two lines :

“Pray let us be married,  
Too long we have tarried,  
But what shall we do for a ring . . . a ring,  
But what shall we do for a ring ?”

Esmé turned round with a gay little laugh, for she knew the voice very well as the voice of Tourntourq.

‘Niall, . . . how dare you ! And what a fright you gave me ! Can’t you see I ’m bathing ?’

‘My dear Esmé, the question is, which are you and which am I—puss or the owl? Because if I’m puss . . .’

‘Oh yes, of course you are. The owl was the girl. I always thought so.’

‘Then we don’t need to worry about the ring . . . I’ve got it.’



## BOOK II



## CHAPTER I

‘ OH, CHARLIE IS MY DARLING ’

NIALL took Esmé to Tomdoun after their marriage, and from there they set out to walk over the hills to Loch Shiel. He told her the story of Prince Charlie as they went, of how he had come in his Great Adventuring, and how when the adventure failed they had hunted him through the hills. His face glowed as he told her, for this is the first of all Romances that goes down the years—sweet and wonderful and young.

The sun fell westward, and the summits were aureoled in gold, diaphanous as mist. A light wind whispered among the heather and the bracken. The scent of the heather filled the air with magic.

They stood a mile above the hotel, just where the first spur rolls on to the upper moorlands, and looked back on the expanse of woodland and loch, the way by which they had come to these fastnesses. Sheer the mountains rose in dim blue distances, and the early fingers of autumn on the birch trees, and the chestnut fans in the deeper valley made delicious contrast with the purple of the heather. There was a stain of blood, it seemed, in the purple of the heather which held the sense of tragedy and wonder that was in all those valleys, and that dwelt upon all these hills.

There were wisps of mist like cobwebs, trailing along the upper moorlands, and sometimes small strands clung to Esmé's skirts, and sometimes she stooped with parted lips to brush them away, laugh-



ing at the damp feel they left behind them. The wide sky was full of sailing clouds that were sedate as ships. The sedateness of the clouds made her gasp with joy, for they reminded her vaguely of the Admiral's face, as it had looked on the night of the great adventure . . . there was the same simplicity, and honesty, and bigness about the clouds,

Cock grouse were crowing, and the sound, she thought, was magical. Little streams, too, babbled at their feet. Esmé stopped, and made a cup of her hand to taste the brackish water.

It was by this very way, Niall said, that the Prince came when he was a fugitive from the English soldiery. The moods of the hills and the moors were his moods ; their lure of joy and sorrow was of a part with the charm that had made his name fragrant. Here was the throne of Romance—Romance, beautiful, strong, swift, infinitely gay, infinitely sorrowful. In these wastes life was so small a thing ; yet of the smallness of life came its wonder, that courage so great could be found to make life noble and important.

That was the secret of the Prince's appeal which had made him Prince Charming of all the world. That was the secret too of the world's longing for Romance and Adventure—a longing ever new and always unsated. Men and women, but especially women, wanted to escape from the weary untruth that life is a serious business of itself ; the shining truth that life is a ridiculous struggle of pygmies made splendid by defiance of all the rules and laws of life, was ever beckoning. It was death alone, he declared, which made life worth living.

The air of the solitude seemed to exercise a stimulation, driving the thoughts like storm clouds through his mind. He proclaimed all the futility of people like the Deerings in rather bitter tones. The Deerings and their kind accepted life, and made what they called the best of it. The best of it was money, and

houses, and dinners, and things . . . wildernesses of things. To get these things they set vast numbers of men and women to work in dull offices, and counting-houses, and stores, and breweries, and other places with roofs, from which God's sunlight was kept out . . . boys and girls full of their splendid youth, and needing love, and laughter, and freedom. They paid other men and women to tell these slaves of theirs that life was a serious business, and that work was ennobling, and lies of that sort. And they invented tyrannies and persecutions for those who dared to call their doctrines by true names, and defy their authority.

Esmé listened with new interest to-day because he had caught her imagination. The difference between him and Jack Deering was so wide that she wondered how she had not realised it sooner, and how it had not driven her away from Jack with even more violence. Jack belonged body and soul to the 'life is real, life is earnest' school, the school that sins and is sorry, never venturing to question the sinfulness of 'sin'; the school that in its leisure hours will weep with you over the essential goodness of human nature, but that frames its business policy upon human nature's essential greediness; the school of sentimentality and make-believe, and comfort and safety.

Esmé's thoughts were vague because her knowledge was vague. She felt rather than thought these things; but the tide of her feeling was strong. Active loathing of Jack and his outlook filled her mind; his kisses in the clean hills were the blandishments of its captor to a wild bird.

Niall and the Prince, she thought, belonged to the summits of the hills; they went in divine carelessness of life's dull threats and stupid penalties . . . the threats of hunger, of poverty, of shame, which are bars to the cage that youth is prisoned in, and the penalties of remorse and regret that the high priests

of the 'seriousness of life' never tire of promising to the rebellious. Niall and the Prince were of the company of adventure, of genius, of vagabondage.

The mists gathered a little about the summits; there was great stillness across all the distance of the moors. A sense of awe gradually hushed the turmoil of her thoughts and his thoughts. He grew silent, as if the moorland filled his mind in wide spaces. The low voice of the wind came to their ears.

A white hare stole across the roadway, gracious as the trailing mist. At sight of them it cocked its ears and then, in splendid bounds, fled across the moss-hags. They watched it until the shadows gathered it away from them.

The mist that had crowned the summits began to creep downward to the lower slopes. Wisps of it lay on the roadway, and they grew longer and more dense, so that sometimes they felt the wet fingers of them on their cheeks. The mountains, in the dimmer light, frowned above them. . . . They hurried on, for Niall knew the danger of the mist. . . . The mist gathered still more thickly about them, cobwebs that touched and clung, soft, diaphanous, menacing. . . . Niall took her hand, and told her to keep close to him because the way was steep, and if they were separated it would be impossible to discover one another again. Esmé's uneasiness was less than his because the mist amused her with its intangible wrapping that took the hills from her sight, and then the woodlands between the hills, and even the roadway. She stopped for a moment, laughing, because Niall's hand seemed to come to her out of a white distance that gave nothing of its secret to her eyes.

'Come,' Niall said sharply, 'it will be impossible if it gets much thicker.'

She allowed him to lead her forward. Then, suddenly, with a cry of wonder she stood still again. The mist had parted for a moment, revealing a strange



spectacle . . . a great herd of red deer, the stags facing her with their heads splendidly thrust up, entangling the mist in their antlers. She caught her breath because the sight in the darkness was like a vision out of dreams.

And then, quick as it had come, the vision began to fade. Esmé exclaimed in disappointment. Before Niall understood what she was about, she released his hand, and ran a few steps forward to have another view of the herd. Suddenly she uttered a cry. The ground seemed to be slipping away from her.

After that she had only a confused idea of what happened till she found herself sitting on a moss hag with the mist wrapped round her like sheets upon sheets of bleached linen. She rose and began to call to Niall, but the mist seemed to damp out the tones of her voice. It was very silent in the mist. Then she realised that her knee was hurting her, and that she could only walk with difficulty. She grew a little frightened, and called again until she was tired of calling. She sat down again, and rested her head on her hands. A sudden sense of misery and loneliness brought tears to her eyes. After that fear came and went like wind on smooth water.

She began to cry, and when she had cried she was tired and very sleepy ; and the moss-hag was soft and easy to lie on. She forgot her troubles a little, and the mist that lay everywhere about her seemed like sweet sheets of her bed. A sense of comfort came to her . . . and there were deeps and deeps of drowsiness . . .

She dreamed that she was engaged to Hal Newlands, but he was not the Hal of her old knowledge of him. Something had happened to him to make him stronger and more interesting. And he was sad too, because he had found a truth, which makes every man sad when he finds it . . . that it is only the lost love which endures. . . .

Her dreaming grew sad then, and then full of strange, brave music and snatches of old songs she had heard Niall singing :

Oh, Charlie is my darling.

And the cry :

Will ye no' come back again ?  
Better lo'ed ye canna be,  
Will ye no' come back again ?

that goes echoing down the years. . . .

Then in an instant, just as she had seen the red deer with their tall antlers, she saw the Prince and his people going by on the old road to Glen Shiel. . . . The Prince was riding in front of his lords, and his head was bare. The golden curls, that have beaconed across centuries of dull toiling, gleamed in the sun : his lips were parted, the wind played with his curls and with his plaid, that was fastened by a great star of silver to his shoulder. And as he came to her she heard his light laughter full of the old sweetness of earth and air that is the spirit of Romance. . . .

He saw her as he went by, and held out his hand to her, with the lace of his cuff falling graciously about it. He beckoned to her, calling her by name, and his voice was rich and low. She rose up ; she would come to him. . . .

' Esmé . . . my Dream Girl . . . '

She opened her eyes. . . . It was Niall's voice that had come to her, and he stood with the mists rolling away from him, as if his coming had dispelled them. . . . There was a light of deep thankfulness in his eyes.

He carried her in his arms, and it was still the wonder of her dream.

## CHAPTER II

### PEARLS ON A STRING

THE next morning at breakfast Niall was gay and careless . . . just as if he had not carried Esmé in his arms all the way across the moors back to Tom-doun. He seemed, indeed, to have drawn away from her, as though he feared the intimacy their circumstances afforded them. A stranger, Esmé thought, could not have been at greater pains to treat her with a stranger's meticulous consideration.

In a way she resented the attitude, and would have forced a different one ; but he encouraged her efforts so little that she gave up the attempt. . . . But she felt rather sad and lonely.

When they went out after breakfast Niall told her that marriage was either ' a tournament of wit or an affair of tea-cups.'

' And one must keep one's rapier sharp, you know. . . . It is the intervals in married life that are dangerous. . . . There is only one thing more terrible than not finding one another ; and that is not losing one another again.'

Esmé did not feel much inclined for this sort of thing, and so she took his arm and just laughed, her short, infectious laugh, to tell him that life was bigger than small talk. She still cherished a sharp recollection of her fear in the mist cloud. The thought rather chilled her. She even saw in a flash of knowledge that there might come a time when his talk would sound hollow. Married life was not usually played in one act.



She told him her thoughts, and noted the shadow which fell upon his eyes as she told him. His philosophy was framed without respect to the darker side of things. But he shrugged his shoulders in the end, declaring :

‘My dear child, one can still be merry. There are so many opportunities for dulness that can be missed if one is merry. I think of Voltaire on his deathbed when the priests gathered round to say “we told you so.” That answer he made them : “*Dieu me pardonnera ; c’est son métier.*” Keep up your heart. One need never not be merry ; at least one need never be serious except about trifles.’

Esmé cried with deep reproach in her voice :

‘Oh, please, don’t say last night was a trifle, Niall. I couldn’t bear you to say that.’

‘A moment, my Esmé. With laughter round about it like spring flowers. There are moods of the moment.’

His eyes grew dreamy because she had started a train of thought. At last he said :

‘That is love, I think . . . moods of the moment, pearls on a string. And the very devil it is to match ’em, too. We may have to search the world before we find our next pearl. To-day for example . . .’ he flung out his hand in a swift gesture, ‘Could you make a yesterday of to-day by any alchemy of pretending ?’

He glanced at her, and his eyes were a little troubled. He did not speak for a moment. Then he recited, in his gentle tones :

‘Hush, for my love reclines

On my breast asleep !

My love is a star that shines

When the night is deep . . .

But the stars will fade when the young day breaks

And my love awakes . . .

Hush, for my love is pale  
And fond in sleeping !  
Like clouds the sweet dreams sail  
That her eyes are keeping . . .  
But the wind will blow all the clouds away  
At the break of day.

‘ Love is a river whose waters are eternally changing, marriage the lake the river flows into. . . . It is only the Dead Sea out of which no river flows. . . . ’

Esmé looked at Niall and took pleasure in him. An idea came to her that men made women wise, yet could not share the wisdom they bestowed, that a man learned comparatively little of women, a woman all things of men. Some day perhaps Niall would grow up. But no, she did not want him to grow up. She wondered if Romance, when a man like Niall grew up, would be deeper and more wonderful, or if it would just fade and die. There might be a more splendid Romance of love than even Niall dreamed of. She asked him :

‘ Suppose we were poor . . . work-people and *had* to live together always ? ’

‘ Oh, we ’d lose one another just the same . . . I in beer perhaps, you in babies. That is the merit of babies and beer. They help married people to lose one another. Haven’t you noticed that drunken men always have loving wives who spend life trying to reform them ? The tragedy comes if they succeed. The wife of a reformed drunkard takes to illness usually . . . until her husband takes to drink again. Most good-natured men marry shrews . . . or make ’em. Really, you know, no constitution could stand what is called an ideally happy marriage. ’

He took Esmé’s hand and gave her a kiss. They walked back to the hotel.

‘ Home now, ’ he said. ‘ I ’ve wired them to say we ’re coming to-night. We ’ll just manage it in the

car by dusk. There 'll be a bonfire and dancing and things. . . .'

'O Niall, I hate ceremonies.'

He drew himself up. A look that she had not seen before came into his eyes.

'Remember you are Tourntourq's wife,' he said.

Esmé laughed. She said :

'Shall I be whipped and put to bed if I'm naughty ?'

But she was really a little afraid.



## CHAPTER III

### IN TWO DAYS

THE news of Tourntourq's wedding gave his clanspeople a subject of talk and speculation which kept them busy. The news came to the village with the morning milk, and additions to it filtered in all day. By evening the full story of the Cabinet Minister's part in the progress of events was known.

The general view was that something like a disaster had taken place. Your Highlander is above all things a ritualist, and next to a funeral a marriage demands, in his opinion, decency and order. There was no decency and order about this marriage; on the contrary, it was indecent and irregular to a degree. It was worse: it was ridiculous. Fear of ridicule dominated the people of Tourntourq like a mediæval dragon.

The people who were not of Tourntourq seemed to be almost as much disturbed. They were not really disturbed, of course, because there was no probability of their being called upon to subscribe to the upkeep of the young couple. But they enjoyed pretending to be disturbed in those difficult intervals of the day which in town are filled by evening newspapers. The Admiral and the Judge and the Cabinet Minister expressed what the Judge called their 'dismay,' and what the Cabinet Minister called their 'reprobation.' The Cabinet Minister was listened to with attention, because it was felt that on this subject he had a right to be listened to. Indeed he was the hero, even the martyr, of the occasion. They surpassed

one another in congratulating Lady Deering, who surpassed herself in feeling congratulated. Lady Deering declared that she had disliked and distrusted Esmé from the first, and that poor, dear Jack had been saved in the very nick of time, and so on.

To do him justice that was not the view which poor dear Jack himself took. Jack mourned for Esmé. Jack began vaguely to realise what Esmé had meant to him—not kisses so much as the right to kiss, asserted in defiance of his mother. He felt himself slipping back into the clutches of the law. The holiness of his love, which had sustained him when Esmé was present, seemed less momentous now than the usefulness of it. If only he could carry on the Esmé tradition ! He thought in his rather clumsy way that the Esmé tradition was knowing what you wanted and getting it.

Hal Newlands also mourned for Esmé when the news came to him, but not as Jack Deering mourned. Hal's mourning was active, angry, outraged mourning. He had been deceived and flouted ; he had been outmanœuvred. All the sentimental streams that rose in his spirit united to form a river. He went out alone into the woods. His knowledge of the poets supplied him with a measure of consolation, and flattered his belief that a poet's soul was his own. He recited to himself : ' Woman experience might have told me,' and the rest of it.

He felt that his experience had told him, and took some satisfaction in the feeling. He was also in a position to endorse the view that frailty's name was woman, and he lingered with a kind of remote and prophetic joy over

Alas ! the love of women, it is known  
To be a lovely and a fearful thing ;  
For all of theirs upon that die is thrown. . . .

There is a lot to be got out of this sort of feeling

when one is seventeen, but the relief takes extracting. Hal had the right temperament for the work, and he got the full measure of the reward. He salved his broken heart, his sense of outraged self-esteem, and his feeling of pity for Esmé within the confines of a single morning. He was not insincere; he was merely boyish. His devotion to Esmé was so sudden and so whole-hearted that her loss seemed to put out the sun in his heaven. It hurt him so that life seemed but a prolongation of the hurt, and to no good purpose. His mind and his body looked upon emptiness, and the emptiness was without hope. He had either to react or break altogether, and his youth secured the full measure of reaction. He hated Tourntourq, and Mrs. Vericker, and Dalglish—all of them, but not Esmé. And yet it was Esmé who had killed his faith.

So he lay under the fir-trees with his bitterness, and his mortified feelings, and his tags of poetry, and his inexperience, and his foolishness, until his head ached, and he felt sick and weary of life. Mrs. Vericker found him there, and, in spite of her anger with him the night before (her suspicions, if she had cherished any, were quite allayed) found it in her heart to be sorry for him. She said :

‘ Hal, I ’ve been looking for you everywhere. Why on earth have you run away like this ? Dalglish told me you promised to go and arrange about the village dance for him this afternoon, and he ’s afraid you ’ve forgotten it.’

Hal looked up ; he did not rise. She saw that his eyes were heavy and weary. She pitied him sharply, and hated Esmé in the same thought.

‘ I had forgotten all about it,’ he said in portentous tones. ‘ And I don’t want to go. Can’t he go himself ? ’

‘ No, he ’s going to the Lacourts this afternoon. He ’s been very kind to you, you know, Hal, and the



village people think a great deal of their dance. He hates to offend or disappoint them.'

Mrs. Vericker hesitated, wondering if she should attempt to probe the sore. She decided not to probe it, because she guessed that anything she might be able to say would lack comfort for the boy, and what was past was past. She stood swinging her parasol gently, watching him. Hal sat up, and crammed his hat on his head.

They went back to Mrs. Vericker's house to luncheon. During the meal neither of them spoke much, and she saw that Hal had no appetite. He scarcely tasted his food; he seemed to be living in a kind of dull dream. He did not once mention Esmé or Tournourq, though she thought several times that he was going to mention them. She guessed that he tried to do it and failed. When the coffee had been served he lit a cigarette (he had only just begun to smoke), and when the cigarette was half burnt he asked :

'Do you believe in forgiveness, Olive?'

Mrs. Vericker glanced at him. His face was slightly red and solemn. He looked like a man with a very long drink in front of him, who experiences both pride and surprise that he will be able to swallow it.

'I don't know what I believe in,' she said cheerfully.

The boy shook his head.

'Forgiveness, Olive, is a trap to catch fools. There is no such thing, just as there is no such thing as unselfishness.' He quoted wearily :

'Joy is a painted bladder  
To cheat the very young,  
I think the world is sadder  
Than ever it was sung. . . .'

'That's the truth. And forgiveness and unselfishness are no more than methods of hiding it.'

Mrs. Vericker could not resist saying :

‘ But only the other day, my dear Hal, you were telling a whole drawing-room full of people that you did believe in unselfishness.’

‘ That was two days ago.’

‘ Well ! ’

He shrugged his shoulders. Could she not understand that there is no time in the soul ?

His poor face was so ridiculous in its solemnity that she had to turn away from him. She wanted to take him in her arms and pet him . . . or to kiss the sore place and make it better.

‘ Positively,’ she said, ‘ you remind me of Dalglish’s metaphysician ; you know his rhyme—’ She tapped on the table with her finger, rather hating her cruelty as she did it, but with the had-to-be-cruel-to-be-kind feeling for justification :

‘ There once was a metaphysician  
Who proved that he didn’t exist,  
And when he explained his position  
His friends said “ You will never be missed.” ’

‘ He rather went one better in that direction than you, sonnie, didn’t he ? ’

Hal cried : ‘ Don’t call me sonnie. I won’t have it.’

His voice had a toothachy quality that startled Mrs. Vericker. She looked at him gently.

‘ Why not ? ’ she asked.

‘ Because I don’t like it.’

Mrs. Vericker touched his hand.

‘ Dear Hal,’ she said.

She sat watching the gloom on his face, and wondering about it. Esmé had been quite right when she called him ‘ a good kid ’ : there seemed to be nothing more to say, really, when that was said. She thought that very soon, when he had forgotten about Esmé, he would make a charming lover for some other good

kid : she envied him a little his reaction from this misery. But her heart hardened against Esmé. It was Esmé, not Hal, who was responsible for last night's escapade. Esmé had encouraged the boy until he was frantic. So she chose to read the situation.



## CHAPTER IV

### SPADE WORK

MRS. VERICKER was one of those women who inspire you with the immediate conviction that they will dance well. Also, that they will dance independently. In the days of the waltz, independence in dancing did not exist ; and the waltz died with the Victorians. In these days you may divide all women into two classes in the measure of a one-step.

She was not too tall, and she had rather a tomboy figure, the kind of figure that suits a pale shade of yellow in evening frocks. Her ankles were conspicuously fine, and she wore her skirts short on that account. The tomboy spirit was in her ankles, too, and in her face and in her eyes. But there were other things than the tomboy spirit in her face.

When Hal went away to his meeting with Nannie M'Clure, Mrs. Vericker went to see Dalgleish. Dalgleish was going to the Lacourts, but not until teatime. He was delighted to have a talk with Mrs. Vericker, because he wanted to tell her about Hal, and what he knew in connection with Hal and Esmé. He was rather surprised when Mrs. Vericker showed him that her knowledge was not less than his knowledge.

'He told you ?' he asked, when she had indicated her views on the matter.

'No. I guessed. Dalgleish, it is written . . . on his lips.'

She sighed. He looked at her pretty, clever face, and was aware suddenly how attractive she was. Her face was full of what is apt to be called character ;

but she was too young for that, he thought. There was a kind of distant pride and some coldness in her face, and behind them both a smouldering fire. You saw the gleam of the fire in her eyes. Her mouth was distinctly cold; it was her most beautiful feature.

‘He ’ll recover,’ said Dalglish dryly. ‘I shouldn’t allow yourself to take him seriously if I were you. The less encouragement boys get in that direction the better. They seem to be maudlin enough nowadays without it. At his age I’d have kicked myself if I’d looked at a woman . . . and been kicked if anybody had seen me do it.’

‘I know . . . what a pity, Dalglish!’

She was laughing at him in her quiet, merry way. He did not resent her laughter, but he did not understand it. His sense of humour seemed to be difficult a little.

‘Surely you don’t take him seriously?’ he asked.

‘I never take any man seriously, of course.’

‘Man!’

‘Dalglish, you told me yourself before Hal came that you thought it would be so delightful to watch him falling in love for the first time. Now didn’t you?’

He laughed.

‘Yes . . . but that was a mood, you know. I think we had been a little sentimental ourselves, hadn’t we? I have to spend my life sitting on my moods. At heart, I believe, I’m as sentimental as you are.’

‘Oh, I’m not sentimental. Widows only seem sentimental, you know. Because it pays. If every woman was a widow there would be no unhappy marriages.’ She laughed. ‘Oh, I don’t know. I wonder how that girl is getting along with her wild man.’

‘I think that girl, as you call her, will be able to take care of herself.’

Mrs. Vericker nodded. They were seated under a tree on deck chairs. The loch lay at their feet shimmering in the afternoon sun. Dalglish got up and filled his pipe.

'I'm awfully sorry to leave you,' he said, 'but I promised Lacourt I would see him about the shoot to-morrow . . . or perhaps you would care to walk across there. It would be rather kind to Dulcie, don't you think?'

'I don't think so,' said Mrs. Vericker. 'In fact, I'm sure it wouldn't be.'

She sat for a time after Dalglish had gone away. She was thinking, and her thoughts did not please her. There was something very disturbing in this escapade of Tourntourq and Esmé, and also in the effect it had had on Hal. The disturbing elements roused up feelings and emotions in herself which she had supposed were dead for ever. They upset the mental equilibrium she had established after the close of her rather unhappy married life. A sense of dissatisfaction with her life, with its freedom from trouble, its undisturbed comfort, its tranquillity, came to her. Like a gust of wind blowing upon dead leaves new thoughts of effort and action stirred that whipped the blood into her cheeks and made her intolerant, suddenly, of her self-chosen rôle of looker-on and adviser. She knew with clear perception that her youth demanded to be served; that this peace into which she had come so gladly was grown irksome and unsatisfying.

Her thoughts turned to her married life with more kindness than they had ever turned before. It had been a huge disappointment, but still it had represented an effort to make something out of life. The fact that her husband had not turned out to be the hero her hopes had expected of him, was perhaps not so much his fault as she had supposed. And he had been very kind. She wondered if her demand for



heroism had blinded her to qualities which in the end she would have come to value. Her husband's married life had not been less of a disappointment, she guessed, than hers had been.

It was sad to think of him dead, and sadder because she could not honestly say that she felt any loss. She smiled, thinking of the letters she had received when he died. Almost all of them had spoken of 'your irreparable loss.' That was what she ought to have felt. What she had really felt was different . . . a dim regret and a great relief, although it had taken her some time to face the fact of the relief and admit it to herself. Curiously enough, she had liked her husband better ever since she had admitted to herself that his death was a relief to her.

These thoughts were bringing her back to Dalglish again when she was surprised to see Jack Deering coming towards her across the lawn. The idea passed through her mind that Jack Deering was rather like what her husband had looked like before their marriage. She dismissed it, and held out her hand to the boy.

Jack Deering accepted her invitation, and sat down in the chair Dalglish had sat in: he had brought the diamond pin she had left the night before. He handed it to her, she thought, with a sigh. He looked older, less well-groomed, less well-pleased with himself. A sudden wonder filled her mind whether there might not be possibilities in his nature of the kind that, very vaguely, she had begun to suspect had been present in her husband's nature—possibilities neither envisaged nor coveted by the woman she had been when her husband married her. She took the pin and held it between her fingers, looking at it. She said:

'I think I want to tell you, Jack, that I was sorry for you last night . . . and then we needn't mention it any more.'

She glanced up at the last word. There was kindness in her eyes. But his face was troubled: she noticed with surprise how troubled his face was.

'I'm afraid I made an awful fool of myself,' he said, 'but what could I do? I'm not brainy, you see, and Esmé is . . . and he is.' He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, as though the mere thought of Esmé was painful to him. . . . 'I don't believe I could ever have been any good as Esmé's husband, do you?'

She shook her head. This was how her husband would have spoken—how he must have spoken. A sudden pity for him crept into her mind, the feeling one has towards a blind man in a crowded thoroughfare. She asked:

'Is braininess, as you call it, much good . . . in a husband? I'm not at all sure.'

Jack smiled, but without much understanding. His little world was topsy-turvy, and he was not the man to set it straight. Now that the first sting of his loss had been borne, he was falling under his mother's influence again. He had the look of a man coming out of a theatre into the light of day . . . the look that welcomes a sane, dull world again. He said:

'Mother is awfully angry with Esmé, you know. But I'm not. Mother doesn't understand her in the least, and she's very fond of Mr. Merridew.' He laughed suddenly. 'It was a bit hot, wasn't it?'

'For Mr. Merridew, oh yes.'

Her eyes were rather dreamy. How impossible he was, and yet how entirely honest. If one could only get oneself to accept the honesty, to see the value of it. She thought that hundreds of women lost all their chance of happiness in life by not accepting just this type of dull, solid honesty . . . by not making the best of it . . . cultivating its homely soil. She touched his hand in a friendly gesture that had just a trace of raillery in it.

‘Women are fools, I think,’ she declared, speaking more to herself than to him.

‘I’m afraid I don’t understand them—not Esmé’s kind, anyhow. The other girls I know are quite ordinary, you see. You sort of know where you are with them.’

She nodded.

‘And they know where they are with you.’

He took out a gold cigarette-case and lit a cigarette. She thought he looked rather relieved than otherwise. His likeness to her husband was almost tantalising. She experienced the sensation of a man who has made a bad failure, and suddenly finds another chance of success offering itself. . . . He interrupted her thoughts by saying :

‘I never seemed to give Esmé the things she wanted. And she isn’t the sort who dig things out for themselves, is she?’ He laughed, adding : ‘Guessing what people want is a frightful strain, really.’

Mrs. Vericker said : ‘So few brides include a spade in their trousseaux. And what a pity !’

She watched him when he left her until he was out of sight. And when he was out of sight she saw him still, only now some alchemy had transmuted his features into the features of her husband. There had certainly been no spade included in her trousseau.



## CHAPTER V

### NAUGHTY BOY

BEING Don Quixote is a dangerous as well as an interesting occupation. The mental strain is considerable, and entails weariness at the last. It is so difficult to forget about ideals when one is tired.

When one is disillusioned, as well as tired, the difficulty increases. Ideals, after all, are the things one hopes never to achieve; the disillusioned man is the man who has achieved them. After they are achieved ideals become boomerangs; you throw them at your friends, and they come back and hit you.

Hal Newlands's ideal was sacrifice; he reflected as he walked down to Tourntourq village to meet Nannie M'Clure that he had got it.

He smiled as the thought filled his mind, and then he laughed. It was a cynical laugh, like the laughs all bad men do on their deathbeds. It announced the height from which this young man viewed the ant-hill of life with its feverish, futile activity. 'To take life as a jest,' Hal's laugh said, 'would be to underestimate its flippancy.'

The trouble about this attitude of mind is that it invites to practice. Because the attitude is really contentious, argumentative. 'You say that life is not a jest! Look, I will soon show you.' It is the 'soon' that is deadly. In the moral world he who hesitates is always saved.

Hal felt contentiousness hot within him, and the heat of his contentiousness was warmed by the recollection of Dalgleish's cool indifference. Dalgleish

would probably sneer at the view that life was a jest ; but he would not be able to sneer at the proof of the view. There was a satisfaction in the thought of Dalgleish surprised and sneerless. He quickened his walk, braced by this picture, a wicked knight bestriding the poor corpses of his victims. He felt his wickedness as a horse feels its oats. . . .

Nannie was waiting for him in the hall, a new Nannie, beribboned, ruinous, looking nearly as wicked as he felt. Waves of recklessness swept over him. He held Nannie's hand long when he shook hands with her, and he looked into Nannie's grey eyes longer. Nannie's grey eyes didn't look half so wicked as Nannie ; but he was no judge.

They had the hall to themselves and nothing to do, because Nannie had already made all the arrangements. Nannie talked to him about dances in an affected prattle that she appeared to relish very much herself. Hal bore with that for the sake of the ribbons and Nannie. He was enticed by the ribbons, which were really rather winning in their *abandon*. Nannie's blouse and Nannie's talk were liars both : but the blouse lied discreetly. Only Nannie's eyes told the truth.

The prattle died by the hand of its own silliness. Nannie boiled a kettle on a spirit-lamp, and made tea, while the boy sat on a bench and watched her. He noticed that Nannie had pretty white hands and small feet, and that her teeth were splendid. She had Esmé's jolliness also . . . a kind of suppressed mirth like a bottle of champagne . . . ginger ale, maybe, in Nannie's case. It was quite remarkable, too, what a sense of furtiveness she managed to get into this business.

Hal felt wicked and wicked . . . so that he shuddered at himself. He had to remember that life was a jest to stop shuddering. And then he had to laugh to assure himself that his memory was all right.

Nannie asked what he was laughing at, and he dared greatly, and said 'You!' He felt his feet slither on the slippery slope.

Ten minutes later he was imbibing weak tea the while his arm—an arm lacking somewhat the decision which the jest of life should impart—clasped Nannie round her tidy waist. Wickedness was giddy now with that feeling of 'let-her-rip' motorists speak of. The boy's face shone, red as a beet. He leered at the pictures of His Majesty and His Majesty's army which decorated the walls. Don Cæsar de Bazan never leered more thrillingly, singing, 'Let me as a soldier fall.'

It lasted another ten minutes, during which Nannie expressed many very commendable opinions on the subject of love and on kindred subjects. It is true she expressed these opinions rather vulgarly, but how to judge her! Beelzebub must not cast out devils. At the end of the ten minutes Nannie gave up talking, and leaned an affectionate head with merry mops of curls on Hal's shoulder, and looked upwards, and made her pretty red lips an invitation most delectable . . . and whispered . . .

'Kiss me, naughty boy.'

And that finished it with a bang.

Hal escaped and stood up. His face was redder than its first redness. His mouth threatened.

'Good-bye,' he said . . . 'I must go. Thank you for the tea.'

He began to go. Nannie stretched out her hand to stop him; her hand swept the air. Nannie looked frightened then. . . . She cried:

'Oh please, we hadn't half finished, you know. . . .'

He stood away from her in the middle of the floor.

'Don't you think you had better fix up the . . . the details with Dalglish?' he said.

'No, why?'

'Because . . .'



He shrugged his shoulders. Was it not very evident? . . . 'Naughty boy!' The indignity of it . . . the indignity! Suddenly furious anger came on him, a gust like an early hurricane. He sprang back to the girl's side; he wrapped his arms about her, seizing her and lifting her off her feet; he kissed her, chastising her with kisses till she gasped and was limp in his embrace.

'Now!' he triumphed.

Nannie began to cry, because he had hurt her a good deal, and frightened her a good deal. She cried rather sweetly . . . on his arm. The splendid conviction of sin well sinned that had blazed out began to fade from his face. . . . He just tumbled down.

'Oh, please don't,' he begged. 'I . . . I didn't mean it.'

'You've made my lip bleed,' sobbed Nannie, fishing for her handkerchief, and pressing it upon the injured member. . . . 'Why . . . why did you?'

'I don't know,' said Hal.

He didn't.

Nannie said: 'I don't like that way of behaving at all. . . .' She went on sobbing. She didn't look at all ruinous now, only pretty and miserable. Hal glanced round the room wildly, but encountered the smile of his sovereign and the soldiers. He cried:

'Oh, please . . . don't . . . don't. I'm most awfully sorry, really. I've behaved like a cad, like a blackguard. . . . I am a blackguard. . . . But I apologise . . . I . . .'

Suddenly Nannie laughed. The tears in her eyes made her laughter like April sunshine.

'Naughty boy,' she said, in slow syllables.

Hal gave her one more kiss.

But on the way home he presented himself with the bill for damages. Item number one was his dreadful lapse from everything, item number two his brutal assault on Nannie, item number three his faithless-

ness to Esmé, which he now told himself was in no whit excused by Esmé's faithlessness to him. He was dangling by a thread over abysses of contrition when he reached Dalgleish Castle, and the letter from Esmé that awaited him cut the thread. Esmé wrote :

' MY DEAR SONNIE,—I want to part friends, and so I'm writing this. I'm afraid it was a little my fault, and I'm sorry. But I didn't know you were so . . . so . . . what shall I say ? . . . knightly ! Well, the Bad Baron has carried me off after all, you see ; and now you must forgive us both if you can. At least, dear Hal, remember that I did say I was sorry. Oh, please remember, because I like you very much, and want to be as good as you thought I was . . . as good as you are.'

The letter was signed ' Esmé ' in a small capable hand.

That night Hal wrote a poem in his bedroom, at the open window . . . the kind of poem he believed Byron would have written, had he loved and sinned and sorrowed thus bewilderingly. It was a poem about the opening of a boy's mind to love and there were many stanzas. It began in this fashion :

Deep in your eyes I saw Elysium sleeping  
 Like a fair maid ; and there were fountains there  
 And passion flowers that their white fires are keeping  
 Within white breasts from the circumambient air ;  
 And roses sweet with rain like young girls weeping ;  
 And music of light laughter the winds bear  
 In pleasant fields of summer when the day  
 Falls on night's bosom in strong ecstasy.

After that there were a few colder verses, and then this cry :

I have no light : I have no laughter, dear,  
 This is nor day nor night nor stars nor moon,  
 Nor young streams flowing, nor enchanted mere,  
 Nor petalled roses pale with love at noon,

Nor the thrush song, like an encrystalled tear,  
Nor music, nor the hum of bees that swoon  
In amorous gardens; or from bell to bell  
Pass on slow wings like an enweaving spell.

There is no pang of sunset when faint clouds  
Glow with young love and take a rosy hue;  
There is no swift desire the moonlight shrouds  
Like the young dead. And the nude skies renew  
No more auroral lightnings; as encrowds  
Love's youngest cheek the hot red blood. The dew  
To the sweet flowers no more its jewels is lending,  
Nor the small rain in muted showers descending.

He was rather pleased with this last couplet, even though he had had to substitute 'sweet flowers' for 'young flowers,' his first inspiration. But everything in a poem couldn't be young, after all, and he had had 'young girls' and 'young streams' and 'young love' and 'young dead' already. He copied the poem out in his round hand and put it in an envelope. He addressed the envelope to

Mrs. MacCallien of Tourntourq,  
Tourntourq Castle,  
and marked it 'To await Return.'



## CHAPTER VI

### TATTERS

DALGLEISH found Dulcie Lacourt at home, and Colonel Lacourt expected home at any minute. So he had tea with Dulcie in the garden and talked to her about anything and everything except the one thing they were both thinking about. Dalglish was rather good at that kind of talk. They coined half a dozen epigrams between them; when they tired of coining epigrams Dulcie asked him to talk about the one thing.

‘Because we can’t go on being silent about it for ever, can we?’ she concluded simply.

Dalglish sighed.

‘Perhaps not,’ he said guardedly. ‘And yet what is there to say? If I spoke what I really feel I should congratulate you. . . . But . . .’

He shrugged his shoulders. She would not allow him, of course. He saw her eyes gleam with sudden resentment, but whether that was against him or against Esmé he did not know. He was quite sure it was not against Tourntourq. She remarked:

‘You are rather conventional, I think, Kenneth.’

‘Every man is conventional when he respects the woman.’

She smiled, thinking how resolute Dalglish was in his code of honour. But her smile died quickly. The hard look came back to her eyes; he thought it made her prettiness seem out of place, like a ball-dress in the morning. He had not seen her look like that before.

‘I have no ill-will,’ she said, rather unconvincingly. ‘Niall is so strange, so unlike all the others.’

Her voice dwindled. Dalglish had the impression that she did bear ill-will. He hurried the thought out of his mind. Her pain and the weakness it revealed were like secrets that he had no right to learn. He tried to change the subject. But she would not permit him to change the subject. She demanded :

‘Tell me about . . . about Esmé.’

He shook his head.

‘I scarcely know her. You heard the story of last night’s doings, I take it.’

She nodded. She even contrived to laugh a little. Presently she said :

‘She is very pretty, I hear. I can just vaguely remember her the day she pushed Niall into the water. She was in a fit of temper on that occasion, but a child only. I think Niall will be rather apt to tire of a child’s tantrums if that is all that has attracted him.’

She turned suddenly with a quiet gesture of repudiation.

‘Don’t think I’m spiteful. . . . It is only because I know him so well . . . so very well.’

He waved the suggestion aside. It was another of those things that he would not have in his mind. He said :

‘He has made his bed. He will have to lie on it. He will certainly get no sympathy from anybody if it turns out to be a bed of nettles. If I did not rather like Esmé I should hope it would turn out to be a bed of nettles.’

Condemnation rang in his voice. Dulcie shook her head.

‘How little you know him, any of you,’ she said gently. ‘He is more upset than you are at the way things have gone.’

She took a letter out of her pocket, and handed it to Dalgleish. He recognised Tourntourq's big sprawling hand. The letter ran :

'MY DEAR DULCIE,—Now that it has come I am broken-hearted. I feel almost that I can't do it. . . . And yet I know that I shall do it . . . to-morrow. (Some one else will tell you why it should be to-morrow instead of any other day.)

'You have never seen Esmé, and so will not understand. I don't understand myself. I only feel that this thing was preordained. There is no escape from it, as there is no escape from being born or from death. Everything else has just gone to tatters.

'You see I'm not making excuses. There are no excuses.'

He signed himself with an immense 'N' that straggled half down a sheet of the paper. Dalgleish folded the letter gravely and handed it back to Dulcie.

'Well?' she asked.

He remained silent. He guessed her necessity, and pitied her anew, but he could not trust himself to speak. If she found comfort in the idea that Tourntourq had not jilted her, but had yielded to a compulsion of supernatural origin, he would not rob her of that comfort.

She watched his face and understood what was passing in his mind. The very gentleness of her nature embittered the knowledge. He saw her wince as though he had wounded her pride. She exclaimed :

'Is he not right? Suppose that we had been married in spite of everything . . .'

He found her insistence very difficult, almost hurtful. He knew that she wanted him to say that Niall was making a great sacrifice in marrying Esmé. He couldn't say it. He selected a cigarette, and lit it deliberately.



'You know what I think, Babs,' he remarked quietly.

'Yes, I know. You wouldn't have done what Niall did . . . not if you had been ordered to on pain of your life. Your code forbids . . . ' she cried suddenly. 'I believe you men who live by code are the real cowards. It is just fear of the consequences which keeps you on your narrow footpaths of respectability.'

He grew silent again; it was so pitiable, all this refusal to face what was obvious and overwhelming. He was about to excuse himself when he saw Lady Deering advancing towards them across the lawn. Dalgleish rose, and Dulcie went to meet her.

Lady Deering was in the second stage of satisfaction over Jack Deering's escape. The first stage had achieved the high-water mark of sheer relief; in the ebb her natural love of a scandalous story asserted itself. She lost not a moment in plunging into the maelstrom of detail which her mind had set whirling. The whole story of the mustard leaf was told over again from the beginning, and also the story of the dinner-party, and the story of Esmé's departure with Mrs. Vericker, and the story of the marriage that morning before the Sheriff. Lady Deering appeared to have obtained reliable information about this latter event.

'All I can say,' she concluded, 'is that I am thankful beyond words that dear Jack escaped her. Just imagine what his married life would have been like! A girl who will behave in that undignified, unladylike manner will most certainly disgrace her husband sooner or later. . . . Indeed, although he behaved abominably, I am quite sorry for poor Tourntourq.'

Lady Deering embraced Dulcie in a look of maternal understanding. She added: 'But he will deserve all he suffers for being so unutterably foolish.'

'I think he rather expects to suffer,' Dulcie said,

with her sweetest smile. Dulcie decided that Lady Deering's sympathy was not worth bothering about.

Colonel Lacourt joined them just then, and prevented Lady Deering from exerting her curiosity to find out what Dulcie meant. Lady Deering addressed herself to Colonel Lacourt in a manner which made that rather stern man wince. But he had to bear it nevertheless, because Lady Deering had not the slightest regard for other people's feelings. When she rejoiced she strove that her world should rejoice with her, whether it would or not. She invited Colonel Lacourt to share her relief.

When she went away Colonel Lacourt took Dalgleish into his smoking-room. 'They did not mention Dulcie or Tourntourq. Colonel Lacourt was one of those men who never mention their womenfolk except conventionally.

## CHAPTER VII

### CHIEF'S MOOD

ESMÉ's impression of her home-coming was an impression of spacious night lit up by the flare of torches, and the deeper glow of bonfires flaming on many hill-tops, for Tourntourq's clansfolk would owe nothing to him, let him owe them what reparation he might. They consumed their irritation at his wedding in fiercer fires than they would have lit for mere welcome. It is the Highland way.

And Tourntourq knew that it was the way of his people, and for the first time felt the meaning of the debt he owed them by his precipitate and undignified marriage. The debt stirred anger in him, because though he would do as he pleased, it did not please him in his chief's mood to do less or more than a chief's part might be. He strode among his people in the great meadow before his Castle with bitterness in his spirit, trying to forget the manner of his marriage.

The largest of the bonfires was lighted in the middle of this meadow, and the leaping flames discovered all sorts of people who had come to pay their tribute, or to spy out the land, or for mere curiosity. There were the clansfolk, of course, a few of them in kilts, and the household servants with Tourntourq's piper at the head of them, and one or two English tourists who happened to be staying in the village, and who welcomed the chance of seeing this business. Nannie M'Clure, who had a way of being discovered by English tourists, was in charge of that party. There were also a few representatives of the county, notably



Dalglish and Mrs. Vericker. The Deerings did not put in an appearance, though their servants did . . . but the Admiral and the Judge hovered on the outskirts of the firelight.

After Tourntourq's piper had marched the bride and bridegroom out to the bonfire, and after Esmé had had certain old men, whose uncouth names tingled in her ears, presented to her, a very old man delivered an oration from a point as near the bonfire as his capacity for standing heat would permit. This oration was about the most startling thing Esmé had ever listened to, and it made her cheeks hot and cold again. But a glance from Niall froze her inclination to run away, or laugh, or cry, or do something . . .

The very old man had a shrill, clear voice, that could be heard a long way, and his habit of accentuating the first syllable of every word, and whining all the other syllables in a crescendo, gave it almost a religious quality. Moreover, a vast and menacing knowledge of the Scriptures enriched his discourse at every sentence. He likened Esmé to Rebecca, with a passing allusion to Rachel, and then to Michal, the wife of David. After that he likened her to the vine, emphasising what he described as the 'bounteous' character of that plant; to the olive-tree, to the fig-tree, and to 'the grass of the field.'

Then he drew a picture of the ideal married state, constituted apparently in part from his personal experience, and in part from what he conceived to be the most exalted degree of happiness. He quoted from the Magnificat in this effort, and also from the Book of Proverbs. Finally, he again instanced the vine—a plant which intrigued him irresistibly—and spoke of Tourntourq as a husbandman in his vineyard.

This last simile brought to Esmé's mind a picture in oils she had seen once in Folkestone, in a shop window, a picture showing a very fat and very solemn man with a beard and a clean-shaven upper lip,

standing with his hand on a large family Bible. He was dressed in a frock-coat. Beside him was his wife, also fat and solemn, with a white shawl over her shoulders and knitting needles in her hands. A row of children of various sizes, like organ-pipes, filled the background.

The recollection was sudden and startling. It came with terrific force : Esmé's fear and shame and exasperation met it as the wind meets the tide. . . . Esmé laughed.

Happily no one heard her laugh except Niall, because she managed to control herself. And the light was not good for seeing. But Niall's eyes were reproachful. She caught her breath in sharp resentment. Had he forgotten that she was cold and tired after their long motor drive ?

The speech came to an end at last, and then Tourntourq replied to it. He said that his people would find that, instead of having one friend at the Castle, as hitherto, they now had two friends . . . and the second better than the first. It had been a tradition that the wives of Tourntourq were the helpers and advisers of Tourntourq's kinsfolk, and so it would continue to be. Both Esmé and himself were at the service of the whole community.

These sentiments were loudly applauded. Then the people thronged away to the home farm to enjoy their chief's hospitality. Tourntourq offered Esmé his arm.

'We must put in an appearance at the barn for a few minutes,' he declared. 'I've asked Dalglish and Mrs. Vericker to join us at dinner. I sent them a message a few minutes ago.'

Esmé cried :

'Oh, why not go to the barn yourself ? I'm tired . . . and I've had enough . . . that awful man . . .'

She stopped. His silence stopped her.

'Please, Esmé,' he said.

They had very much the same thing to go through again, only happily the old man had been conducted to his house. No fewer than five pipers welcomed them in the barn. The air screeched and hissed. But Niall said the piping was very good, and told her that two of the pipers were famous throughout the Highlands, and had won the approbation of his late father. She detected a slightly hurt tone in his voice, as if he guessed that the information would not interest her much.

‘I suppose it’s an acquired taste,’ she said.

The people in the barn drank Tourntourq’s health, and then Esmé’s health, and after he had replied to the toast they waited in evident expectation that she would reply also. She glanced at Niall, and saw that he hoped she would reply. A flash of her old reckless mood came to her. Her head felt light, and her brain seemed to wink.

‘People of Tourntourq,’ she cried, speaking the first words that occurred to her, ‘I’m awfully grateful to you, really. You’ve been fine, and you’ve made me feel at home right away. I think that all the finer of you, because I did come to you with a bit of a hop, skip, and jump, didn’t I? And I know a Scottish laird is a very sacred person indeed . . . in fact, I’ve been a little wee bit frightened ever since the Sheriff married us. But after to-night I won’t be frightened any more. If I came with a hop, I shall go away on crutches—I mean, very very slowly.’

Esmé’s cheeks were flushed, and her eyes sparkled; the light was in her hair. All the men cheered her. But a few of the women looked doubtful. They were watching Tourntourq’s expression. His expression promised that some day Esmé would learn what might and what might not be spoken by a chieftain’s wife addressing her husband’s clanspeople.

They sang ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ and then Esmé and Tourntourq went away to the Castle, with the pipers



marching before them and behind them. In the open air the pipes sounded much less oppressive. Esmé was still excited by her speech-making, and rather proud of herself for having done it. She asked :

‘ Well . . . did I say the right thing ? I was so nervous I scarcely knew what I was saying.’

She glanced at Niall’s face as she spoke, ready to forgive him their little coolness of the earlier evening. But his face chilled her.

‘ Not quite the right thing, I ’m afraid,’ he declared moodily, ‘ but, of course, you ’re new to our ways as yet. It was good of you to try, and I appreciate it, really.’

‘ Niall . . . oh, why ? . . . ’

Esmé restrained herself with a great effort ; but tears sprang to her eyes. The injustice of him hurt her ; and more than his injustice, the unconscious reproof that had underlain his attitude ever since they came back to the Castle. The thought made her hot and cold with vexation.

They came to the door of the Castle, and the pipers stood in a semi-circle round the door. Esmé saw Dalgleish and Mrs. Vericker in the doorway. She brushed the tears from her eyes with a quick sweep of the hand. At least they should not see that there was anything amiss. She shook hands with both of them.

They went into dinner without formality, because it was getting late. With a chill of dismay Esmé beheld another piper . . . an old and very resplendent person, standing at the end of the table. He wore elaborate Highland dress, with many bows and ribbons and buckles. He looked intensely solemn. Tourn-tourq went straight up to him and shook him by the hand.

‘ Ah, Colin,’ he cried, ‘ this is splendid of you ! ’ He turned to Esmé. ‘ Colin has been ill. I think

you were there when I first heard of his illness, by the way. But he couldn't miss this great occasion. Colin was my father's piper.'

Esmé shook hands with Colin, and remembered quite distinctly that it was he who had come to Niall's aid years ago, after she had pushed him into the water. She saw that Colin also remembered. Dinner began to the strains of Colin's pipes.

## CHAPTER VIII

‘ DRINK TO ME ONLY WITH THINE EYES ’

A REPUTATION for consistency means that one always meets people in the same circumstances. The less a man has seen of the world the more consistent he usually is. And nearly everybody is frightened to say that consistency is a vice.

Tourntourq was still bothered by this respect for consistency that his father had taught him at the point of the rod. And so he suffered in the thought that he couldn't be quite as much the chief now as he would have liked to be . . . because he had broken the Tourntourq tradition in the matter of Esmé, and also the promise he had given his father on his deathbed. It was astonishing how much he suffered, for he had broken the tradition deliberately; but then the unfaithful husband so seldom envisages, at the moment of his defection, the hour when once more he will be at home face to face with his wife and children. Repentance is one of those emotions that depend on furniture and pictures and things, tables and chairs sanctified by the uses of memory. Nobody ever repented properly in an hotel.

It was the tables and chairs and pictures in his dining-room that really wrung Tourntourq's heart . . . the bonfires and speeches had only been a preliminary. There was something quite awful, like the Twelve Elders at the Day of Judgment, about those black, strong, massive chairs on which his father and his father's friends had sat in the great old times. The very shapes of the chairs routed all his



waywardness. He felt like a criminal face to face with the good men and true; and for the moment he was ready to cry 'Guilty,' and ask mercy of them.

His mood imposed itself on Esmé, as a man's moods so often impose themselves on his womenfolk. Esmé's conviction of the earlier evening hardened into certainty. . . . Niall had become her critic, as his people were, as his father would have been. It was his father and his people against her and against the things she represented . . . his mysticism and his treasures. She recognised with a thrill that she was a part of Niall's mysticism . . . the latest addition to his museum. The funny stones and figures in the gallery which opened off this room were her fellow-conspirators. She was his dream made flesh.

She glanced at Mrs. Vericker to see if the secret was already known. Mrs. Vericker had not forgotten Esmé's relationship with Hal. Her smile promised a reckoning in due season. Even Dalgleish seemed to have lost his air of sympathy. She thought that Dalgleish despised her very much.

Her unhappiness increased so that she began to grow reckless. Colin's pipes, which were not quite like any other pipes she had heard, ministered to her recklessness. There was a wild, rebellious note in their music, like the beatings of a bird's wings against cage bars. The music defied all the Twelve Elders and the good men and true, and old Tourntourq with his iron discipline; the music declared that men and women were free to shape their lives as they willed, to make good or to make evil of them. The music was on her side, on the side of the misty things. And it was greatly on her side, too, so that under the spell of it, for a moment, Niall seemed to waver in his repentance. But only for a moment; abruptly he ordered Colin to play the MacCallien's March.

The MacCallien's March was on the side of old

Tourntourq, and Esmé was beaten. Mrs. Vericker said to Tourntourq :

‘There is the spirit of your lochs and hills in that march, I think. . . . It was your father’s favourite music, wasn’t it?’

‘Yes . . . my father heard it on his deathbed. He said he would march to no other tune.’

Tourntourq bowed his head. That memory just now was bitter. Mrs. Vericker turned to Esmé :

‘I rather envy you Colin’s pipes. . . . There are no pipes quite like Colin’s, you know.’

Esmé replied that she was not yet a judge of pipes and pipers ; her tones were rather less than encouraging. Tourntourq felt suddenly exasperated at Esmé’s tones, as though she tried to insult him. He spoke away from her to Dalgleish. Mrs. Vericker also spoke away from her. And the eyes of old Tourntourq looked down upon her, coldly disapproving. . . . They seemed to have left her alone, all of them, to the mercy of old Tourntourq’s eyes.

The dinner ended. Colin stopped piping, and a servant brought a loving-cup of fine crystal and silver and placed it in front of Tourntourq. Tourntourq rose, and raised the cup to his lips. Then the cup was handed to each of his guests, and last of all brought to Esmé. Esmé refused it.

‘It is one of our customs,’ Tourntourq said in final tones.

Esmé nearly refused again. But in the end she rose and took the cup, and was raising it to her lips. Then her eyes caught the gleam in the eyes of old Tourntourq, looking at her just over the rim of the cup. The eyes of old Tourntourq were full of cold triumph. She started at the sight of old Tourntourq’s eyes, and the power seemed to go right out of her hands.

The loving-cup fell to the floor with a crash of broken glass.

## CHAPTER IX

### BATS

WHEN Dalgleish and Mrs. Vericker had gone away the things that had been hiding all evening like bats among the rafters began to flap about. They were dismal things, as shadows are dismal after the sunlight, and small horizonless things, as shadows are small and horizonless. (That is the mischief of love, it is so easy a prey of small vexations; its very strength gathers the clouds about it.) But to Esmé, with old Tourntourq's eyes upon her, and to Tourntourq, wrapped in his chief's mood, they did not seem small things, but very great and sombre, so that both of them felt a chill mist creeping into the marrow of their souls.

The chill mist caught them in the great hall where chieftain after chieftain had hung his trophies: sombre stags' heads and targets and broadswords, arrows and assegais; the skin of a tiger from Bengal, a buffalo's horns, the trophy of an Indian swamp, and so on. All these things belonged to the party of old Tourntourq; they were his allies, his servants that did his bidding. In the great hall there was not a single thing down to the grandfather's clock, with its hoarse Time and Eternity tick, that did not belong to old Tourntourq's party. There was not a single thing that could be called friendly or even tolerant. The feeling of silent judgment and condemnation almost choked Esmé. She caught at Niall's arm.



‘ Oh, you aren’t sorry . . . ’ she demanded piteously, ‘ already. . . . ’

Her voice broke. Tears came in her eyes.

‘ No, Esmé, but . . . ’

His voice lacked conviction ; and the ‘ but ’ was heartless. She left his arm, and stood away from him. She tingled all over.

‘ But what ? ’ she cried, with defiance in her tones.

‘ But . . . you might try to . . . to help. I know our customs are ridiculous from your point of view. But they are our customs.’

‘ I ’m sorry I broke your loving-cup, if that is what you mean. I ’ve apologised once. Shall I apologise again ? ’

‘ Oh, the loving-cup doesn’t matter. . . . It ’s . . . it ’s the way you seem to be going to take these things. You must remember that Dalgleish and Mrs. Vericker both knew my father ; they dined here often when he was alive. They naturally watched . . . ’

‘ I hate Mrs. Vericker,’ Esmé said ; ‘ and both she and Dalgleish hate me.’

Her cheeks were flushed now, and she was thoroughly reckless. She stood just under the great tiger-skin, and her hair made a curious, vivid contrast with the yellow stripes. He thought she looked more wonderful than he had ever seen her. But his temper was exasperated.

‘ Nonsense ! ’ he declared. ‘ Why on earth should they hate you, either of them ? ’

‘ Why ? ’ She laughed bitterly. ‘ I ’ll tell you. Dalgleish, because I stole you from Dulcie Lacourt ; and Olive Vericker, because Hal Newlands fell in love with me, and she caught him in my bedroom the night before we ran away. . . . ’

Esmé’s recklessness flamed out as she made this last statement, and then, as if emptied by its own explosive force, waned under Niall’s eyes. Niall had

forgotten his chief's mood and old Tourntourq at last. His voice was strange when he said :

'In your bedroom. . . . She caught him in your bedroom.'

'Yes. The silly boy came in by the window after everybody had gone to bed. . . . Niall, don't look at me like that. If I had guessed you would take it like that, I wouldn't have told you.'

He came to her and put his hands on her shoulders. She thought he looked quite splendid : he was pale, and his eyes gleamed. He devoured her with his eyes.

'Esmé . . . what . . . what happened when he came into your bedroom ?'

'Nothing. . . . What could happen ? I had a frightful time, though, getting him out. He wanted me to run away with him so that you couldn't get me. . . .'

She wriggled away from Niall, and stood some distance from him.

'You 're horrid,' she said, 'to suspect things . . . and I hate being looked at as if I was . . . I don't know . . . a doubtful bargain or something. . . . Niall, I thought you believed in everybody being free. . . .'

He stood looking at her with great relief and some doubt in his face. But the doubt vanished quickly, because Esmé's honesty was as clear as Heaven. A sense of being ridiculous came upon him, and made him wince. He frowned to hide his annoyance. Esmé remarked :

'There 's lots of different kinds of adventures, you see, Niall.'

They went upstairs to bed. Niall came into her room. He seemed to be forgetting old Tourntourq every minute. He flung his arms round her and kissed her, and lifted her right up in his arms as if she had been a small child. That was a fine sensation,

and she laughed in his arms. Then he set her down again, and sat beside her, and took her hand. He didn't say anything, and at last she kissed him, and got up to undo her hair. . . . Then she gave a little cry, because there was a letter addressed to her in a round boyish hand, lying on the toilet table. She picked it up and opened it. It was Hal's poem. She glanced over her shoulder at Niall, whose eyes were dreamy. Niall did not seem to have noticed the letter, so she crossed the floor to him, and spread it out on his knee.

‘Look! . . . My dear Hal is a poet. . . .’

He looked: he read the poem slowly, without raising his eyes. She heard him repeat

‘The thrush song like an encrystalled tear,’

as if the line pleased him. At last he brushed the leaves from his knee to the floor.

‘It's not bad, I suppose,’ he said indifferently. There was enough effort about his indifference to give Esmé a thrill.

‘Oh, it's charming!’ she cried.

She picked up the leaves, and folded them. Niall still looked dreamy. She was glad, because it meant that old Tourntourq was quite beaten for the moment. She came back to him, and sat beside him primly, with her hands folded together in her lap. She recited:

‘Hush, for my love reclines  
On my breast asleep.’

Niall crumpled her all up. . . .



## CHAPTER X

### GETTING BORN

HER experience at Tournourq's home-coming revived in Mrs. Vericker's mind memories of her married life which refreshed her determination never to marry again. That determination, as she told Dalgleish on the way home, had been in danger of wavering a little. Dalgleish, who was more silent than usual, did not reply at first, and she added :

'Esmé will have to pay for her escapade. Poor brat, she's just beginning to find out that she's married a whole family tree. Niall will not forgive her if she forgets it either.'

'I don't think,' Dalgleish said, 'that you need have any fear. I . . . I found out something to-night, Olive.'

'Yes ?' said Mrs. Vericker sharply.

'Those two love each other.'

His voice was so sad that she started. She had never heard him speak in that way before.

'Really, Dalgleish, you frightened me. . . . Fancy you getting sentimental! One would almost think you had fallen in love yourself . . . or at least that you believed in love . . . or . . .'

Dalgleish interrupted her.

'Don't, Olive . . . please.'

He broke off, seeming at a loss to explain himself. In the moonlight she saw his features clearly. He was as solemn as an owl.

'Dalgleish,' she said again . . . and added, 'perhaps it's your soul that is getting born, you know.'

He walked a little way in silence. He seemed to be growing more and more disturbed. His mood communicated itself to her, and she did not try again to banter him. The childish quality, which was the great charm of her expression, came back to her face. Glancing at her, he saw her childishness ; he smiled. ' I suppose I am absurd,' he said, ' but I can't bear to hear you speak badly of any one. Bitterness is so empty, isn't it ? Besides, your face belies you. A woman with a face like yours belongs to the gentle things . . . ' He paused, and then added vehemently : ' You never loved your husband, of course. It was a hideous mistake.'

' Yes . . . it was a mistake.'

' But an unhappy marriage, a mistaken marriage, does not disprove love.'

' I don't know . . . ' She caught her breath, and the sound was like a sob. ' I don't think that I have ever been in love, Dalgleish.'

He gazed at her, scanning the pure beauty of her profile. His eyes were hungry and thirsty, the eyes of a visionary. He trembled to the touch of her arm. She heard him repeat to himself :

' There is delusion in the world—and woe  
And fear and pain—we know not whence we live.'

She experienced a sudden fear that made her say :  
' You know I used to tell you about love . . . when you were the cynic . . . '

Her voice was caressing. He stood still as if a sudden resolve had come to him. He turned to her with his face fully illuminated by the moon. He cried :

' Olive, listen to me. I can't ask you for what you have not got to give ; but I can tell you, and I must tell you . . . '

He spoke and bowed his head. She still watched him out of her childish eyes. It was sad, this up-

heaval of his accustomed good nature. Would they never again be the same friends they had been in the past? She bit her lip because the thought nearly made her cry. How stupid of him to force this new issue between them. She relinquished his arm, and walked alone beside him.

'You know I shall always like you more than anybody else, dear,' she said after a little time. She added: 'My husband sometimes talked like you have, when he was bitter with me. I think he was more unfortunate and more mistaken than I was. I seem to owe him so much. It is awful this feeling of being in debt to the dead.'

'You were very young when you married.'

'Oh yes . . . but that doesn't make any difference.'

'I think it does. At nineteen love is so nearly generosity. One loves as one helps an old lady across the street . . .'

Mrs. Vericker laughed and took his arm again.

'But, Dalgleish, that is how every woman wishes to be loved . . . in her off moments.' She added inconsequently: 'I think it is only people who are not our friends that we permit to love us in the other moments. And I have always been your friend, you see.'

'Yes, always.'

He was silent, and then he smiled.

'Forgive me; but something has happened. I don't know what exactly. Everything seems different, empty, and stupid. And yet not empty; only waiting to be filled. You can't understand; how should you?'

He talked on, heaping words on words, in an attempt to disentangle his thoughts. She felt that it was a sorrowful process, but he gave her so little to hang her sympathy upon. He seemed to resent the idea of her sympathy. His distress, too,



reminded her so vividly of her husband, that she suffered in the display of it. Pangs of remorse smote her : if only she could find her husband again and tell him that what she could give to amend matters she would give gladly. Her husband, like a familiar spirit, seemed to watch her out of the night with his hungry, weary eyes, that by some trick of the senses always reminded her of Jack Deering's eyes. . . . She thought again, dimly, how like one another her husband and Jack Deering were . . . and how unlike both of them were to Dalgleish.

## CHAPTER XI

### CANDLE-POWER

THE day after they came home was spent by Niall and Esmé in avoiding one another—Niall, because it was his policy so to do, and Esmé because the encounter with old Tourntourq had left her a trifle bruised. Esmé had no delusions about old Tourn-tourq : she knew that he meant business. And Esmé also meant business.

She went out alone after breakfast, and walked along the shore under the cliffs. The sea was wide and empty between the islands, and the sky full of clouds that marched solemnly like armies passing to some distant battlefield. She sat down on a ledge of rock, and rested her head on her hands. Her eyes were wistful, but not sad at all. Because Esmé knew that she had her happiness with her, in her hands. The idea of fighting braced her wonderfully.

She found a small pool with seaweed growing in it, and she fished about in the pool with her finger until she had disturbed a couple of tiny crabs and a shrimp from their hiding holes. She tried to make the crabs run a race, but they ran in opposite directions, and then when she corrected that, climbed on each other's backs and were contrary, and so she gave up the attempt in disgust. She began prodding the weed again to find other treasures, and out wriggled an eel no longer than a little black pin.

She jumped away at that, because eels always gave her creepy feelings up her back. But then she thought of what some one—she couldn't remember

who—had told her about eels and their wonderful love-making. How the ugly yellow eel of the streams got a fine coat of silver when the love-call came, and how he would rush day and night to the sea, overland even, if going overland might hasten his journey. And how he often travelled hundreds of miles in the sea to find water a thousand fathoms deep for his love-making. That was the end so far as the eel was concerned, because he never came back again. Away down in the deep, deep sea he loved and died. . . . The little eel, she knew, had all that splendid journey in front of him, wrapt in the dim chrysalis of his brain . . . and he was not a whit bigger than a small black pin.

She laughed suddenly, wondering if there were any old Tourntourqs down in the deep sea to disapprove of the newcomers among the eels, or if the eels really died of love, like the bees and the flowers. How strange it all seemed : the whole world fighting this battle of love day and night, in pool and stream, in the air, in the sea, in sweet fields and garden-lands, sometimes silently, so that not a ripple told of the struggle, but also with the music of a thousand cadences, with the colour of fair sunsets, with the incense of sweetest perfume. Love was like a furnace promising delight when seen far away, but insatiable of its victims. Man and beast, bird and fish, the whole miracle of the insect world were but so much fuel of these flames. With awful impartiality they were consumed . . . consumed, that from their ashes new fuel of fire might be produced.

Her eyes had grown a little frightened as the thoughts crowded on her ; but she waved the thoughts away, breaking the dull cobwebs. After all, tragedy was to be shut off from this procession of desire, to be the moth that didn't flutter to the candle flame. The delirium of the candle flame was not really a little thing at all. . . .



She jumped up, stung by the new idea. . . . That *was* it. The delirium of the candle flame was not a little thing. . . . What ages of emotional experience might not be crowded into that fierce instant; and what splendour of achievement to give wings and pulsing body into the very lips of this destruction.

She stood with her lips parted, a figure of grace and swiftness; the sunlight seemed to clothe her in a dim, golden tracery. The sea at her feet, this great sea so full of mysterious secrets, of life and death struggles, of passion and pain, thrilled her with the wonder of it. She flung out her hands to it, carried away by the spirit of its longing.

A voice behind her said: 'It is wonderful, isn't it?'

She turned and found Dalglish. She stood looking at him a little uncertainly, as if she doubted him friend or foe. Dalglish's eyes, however, drove away the doubts. So she held out her hand.

'I'm glad . . . if we're friends still,' she declared.

'But why not?'

'Oh . . . you disapprove of me, don't you?'

'Not now.'

Dalglish was still inclined to be portentous. He said, 'Not now,' as though his past had rolled away from him and could never roll back again. Esmé tingled a little at the sound of his voice; and guessed a little. But Dalglish was so evidently a good fellow. She thought that even if she saw Dalglish being a brute or anything she would still not believe that it was he. She sat down on the rocks and patted a smooth place for him to sit on beside her. She cried:

'Come, because I want to talk to you . . . and if you really have forgiven me, you're such a nice talk-to-able person that . . . that I don't know . . .'

She broke off with a tilt of her shoulders. When he sat down she touched his hand.

'You're sad. Why?' she asked.

'Oh, life is sad.'

'Not a bit of it. Life's fun. I . . . I love life.'

'Oh . . . but you're happy.'

Esmé glanced at him.

'Oh, yes . . . I won, you see, that time.' She added, because he didn't understand, 'against old Tourntourq, you know, Niall's father. When Niall is Niall he's mine, but when Niall is Tourntourq he becomes a . . . a chief. Chiefs don't approve of little me. You didn't last night, because you were feeling a chief too.'

'And to-day?' he asked.

'Oh, not to-day. . . . Why, look at the sun and the sea. How stuffy all that is out here. Out here there are bigger things than chiefs. Why, Niall taught me that himself, silly man that he is. And now I shall have to teach him over again. Do you know I was just thinking that . . . that I'm very happy.'

'And I was just thinking that I'm very sad . . . ' He paused a moment. 'It's pretty much a toss-up, isn't it, whether one is happy or sad?'

'No,' said Esmé, 'it isn't. Probably that's just why you are sad. Because you don't think things matter enough.' She caught his arm. 'Oh, do you know, I never knew how much things mattered till I saw Niall looking at me with old Tourntourq's eyes.'

Dalgleish laughed.

'But I knew old Tourntourq. Really he was a most benevolent person. Niall's pranks, too, disturbed him quite a great deal when Niall was a boy. I think you are overestimating . . . '

Esmé shook her head positively, and Dalgleish was silenced.

'I *know*,' she said. 'You don't, and Niall doesn't. Niall's got his ideas. Idea No. 1 is old Tourntourq, and idea No. 2 is how-to-be-happy-though-married.'

The recipe is, "Don't see too much of one another." That's why I'm here alone this morning. As if . . . but never mind. There's still little me left. I feel like a general planning a campaign. And I must win.'

'I don't think there's any doubt about your winning.'

A shadow fell on Esmé's face.

'There is a doubt,' she said positively, 'a big doubt. Look . . . I have only myself against centuries and centuries on the one side, and oh, such lovely dreams on the other. Because I like Niall's dreams as much as he does. Only they aren't deep enough. Love isn't just a game of tilt-in-the-ring, love is . . .'

She opened her eyes and her mouth like a little girl waiting to be kissed good-night. She stayed waiting.

'Yes,' said Dalgleish, almost roughly, 'what is love?'

Esmé woke up.

'It's somebody,' she said, with laughter coming in her eyes.

Dalgleish said:

'Yes . . . that's what love is.' She thought he winced. She touched his hand again.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Because I think I can guess. But I'm quite sure it will all come right in the end. I . . . I saw her eyes last night.'

He started, gazing at her in amazement.

'How do you know anything about it?' he demanded almost angrily.

'Because,' said Esmé softly, 'I saw your eyes too, last night.'

They got up and walked along the shore. Esmé said:

'Funny . . . and I used to think it was Dulcie Lacourt . . . especially when you were so angry with me after the dinner-party.' She added rather regretfully, 'What a pity it isn't Dulcie Lacourt.'



‘Dulcie,’ said Dalglish, with a hard ring in his voice, ‘will never love anybody but . . .’

He broke off suddenly, distressed that he should have allowed himself to say this to her. . . . It was Esmé’s turn to wince.

## CHAPTER XII

### OLD-LADY POWER

THE Old Ladies of whom Niall had told her called on Esmé in the next few days, and she did her best to behave as Tourntourq's wife ought to behave. It wasn't very easy, because they all seemed to know about everything, and to disapprove of it. You had the feeling that they thought of Esmé in the same way as they would have thought of some one caught cheating at cards. At least, they looked as if they thought so. And every one of them had known old Tourntourq intimately.

Old Tourntourq, indeed, seemed to possess enormous resources in Old-Lady Power—people whose names Esmé had only just heard, people who never went anywhere, or had any one to see them, old people, fierce people like eagles dwelling apart. There was the Miss M'Corquodale of the Lochs, for example (you were liable to an uncomfortable awakening if you forgot that she was *the* Miss M'Corquodale, or if you omitted to add 'of the Lochs' when you addressed her on paper). The Miss M'Corquodale expressed the view before her call was ten minutes old that 'Tourntourq's dear father' was one of the greatest men whom Argyll had ever produced. His greatness resided in his dignity and his dislike of unconventionality. In fact, there was something 'Miltonesque' in his character. Being 'Miltonesque' was the noblest exercise of the human intelligence in the Miss M'Corquodale's view; Milton was for her the supreme illustration of mental and spiritual

force, a kind of link between the Godhead and the feudal system . . . though it is difficult to understand just how the connection was traced. When the Miss M'Corquodale was happy she read *L'Allegro*, and when she was sad she read *Il Penseroso*, and in her grimmer moods

Of Man's first Disobedience and the fall  
Of Man

satisfied her spirit. It was humiliating for Esmé to realise that she had not read Milton; and the poor girl suffered during those few moments when the Miss M'Corquodale was pointing out to her that Milton was not the author of *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*.

The day the Miss M'Corquodale called came also the Lady Emily M'Wharrie of M'Wharrie, a widow possessed of three sons and two gauchy daughters. The Lady Emily M'Wharrie and the Miss M'Corquodale were very like one another to look at, both old, both small, both dressed in nameless black. But the likeness was not to be insisted on. The Miss M'Corquodale's ancestor, known as the Lord of the Lochs, had lost his lochs, and his head too, after Culloden, whereas it was a long, long time after Culloden before the late Mr. M'Wharrie had even found his feet—and that was in the cotton trade. The Lady Emily, it is true, was the daughter of a peer; but the peerage had come from the hands of Mr. Gladstone.

Still they joined forces in praising old Tourntourq; the Lady Emily M'Wharrie being as busy as the Miss M'Corquodale in this pursuit in order to wipe away the recollection of the fact that old Tourntourq had consistently snubbed her and hers throughout his long life. Esmé listened patiently: she agreed patiently. She prayed in silence that Niall would not come to see her listening and agreeing, or to agree himself. And that prayer ascended with rein-



forcements when the Miss M'Corquodale proceeded to indicate old Tourntourq's wishes in regard to his daughter-in-law.

These wishes, she declared, had centred upon Dulcie Lacourt, who was the daughter of his dearest friend, and 'a charming girl and so gentle'—this in pleasant contrast clearly to others of more violent ways.

'He often told me,' the Miss M'Corquodale declared, 'that he felt sure Dulcie would rise to the position of Tourntourq's wife, and be as deeply respected as was his own dear wife. Her dignity of manner impressed him very favourably even when she was a small child. She never seemed to forget herself . . . and . . .'

The Miss M'Corquodale stopped there as if she waited to see the effect of her words.

It was not necessary for her to go any further. Esmé was punished enough. Esmé's face was pink and her eyes shone.

'Why do you come here and tell me this?' she demanded suddenly and stormily.

A silence fell in the room. The Miss M'Corquodale rose.

'That you may realise how many eyes will be watching you, child,' she said.

When she had gone, and the Lady Emily M'Wharrie had also gone, there came Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor of Benloch, a very old woman, who was supported into the room on the arm of a footman. Her large, time-furrowed face had much dignity in it, though, and there was a crisp twinkle in her eyes. Every now and then she clucked, just like a broody hen . . . a most alarming sound.

'My dear,' she told Esmé, when she was safely anchored, and the footman had gone, 'I have come to pity you. I know that scapegrace of a husband of yours, and I knew his father. In fact, his father made

love to me when I was in my teens . . . and made it very well too. But you 'll have a shocking bad time, you know. I say give me a Scotsman in England or in Timbuctu, but take him away from me in Scotland. My dear M'Gregor is every bit as bad as all the rest of them, and we still quarrel dreadfully about it.'

She clucked again, ruffling the feathers of her wings. You had the impression of intense haste, as if Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor had but a little time to say all that throbbed and rushed in her mind. Esmé began to smile. Esmé came and sat on the sofa beside her.

'Yes, yes,' said Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor, 'I know. I met dear Jane—the Miss M'Corquodale that is—as I was driving here. I quite expected to find you in tears. But some day you will like Jane . . . believe me, child. When Jane was twenty she ran away with a boy in the Coldstreams, who was staying with them; only her father caught them at the boat and brought her home again, and he married some one else. So now you understand. Jane will love you because you insulted those dreadful Deering people, and because you dared Niall. But she will take five years and at least two babies to tell you that she loves you.'

Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor clucked again, and took Esmé's hand.

'And, of course, it's worth it all,' she hurried on . . . 'everything that happens is worth while. That's why Dulcie lost him; she didn't know it was worth while. Fight, fight, fight, I say; and don't believe the man who says he's happier when you agree with him. He isn't. When you agree with a man he leaves you. They're the most contrary beasts. If you fight him, he shakes you, and that's the right thing; and then . . . but, dear me, child, you look as if you were crying . . . now . . . now. . . .'

Esmé was crying. Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor's eyes made her cry. They were such kind eyes, and she was so tired.

She was still crying, and Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor was still speeding along the ways of her small talk, when Niall came into the room with Dulcie Lacourt.



## CHAPTER XIII

### ‘M‘GREGOR DESPITE THEM’

ESMÉ got up when Niall came into the room. She brushed away her tears with a sweep of her hand that was like the sweep of the mist in a hill storm. Her eyes grew cloudy again in their unveiling. Niall said :

‘ This is Dulcie, Esmé.’

Just as though he were introducing his sister. But Esmé saw that he looked annoyed because she had been found crying.

Esmé bowed to Dulcie, and then sat down again beside Mrs. Gregor M‘Gregor. Dulcie sat beside Niall. . . . The room gradually filled with silence. . . . Mrs. Gregor M‘Gregor glanced round uneasily, and saw that everybody else was glancing round uneasily. An angry flush mounted to her cheeks. She drew a quick, deep breath.

‘ So, my dear Niall,’ she cried, ‘ the Old Ladies have had to come to you after all, because never, never, *never* have you come to the Old Ladies.’

She waved her hand, discounting a reply.

‘ Once upon a time, in the good old days, the Old Ladies were a power in the land, and in these days no one was too busy to come and see them. . . . That was before your day, my dear Niall, before you invented your fairies and things that set silly girls talking about you all over Argyll. . . . But now old ladies are gone out of fashion, I hear. Now it’s nymphs and elves, and what-you-may-call-’ems, and fairies that you go to see when you aren’t too busy

with yourselves, all of you, to go and see anybody at all. . . . Fairies indeed ! . . . Give me the fogies, and you can keep your fairies. Not that we were fogies always, mind you. I remember. . . . But there, it was before you were born. . . . Oh, we quite understand that we can’t be half as interesting to this generation (and perhaps that’s just as well) as we were to the last. Still, for your father’s sake, my dear Niall, you might show that you remember our bare existence.’

Mrs. Gregor M’Gregor breathed herself, fixing Niall with a round and threatening eye. Niall was too much pleased, however, at this assault on the impending silence and too much startled to make any reply at first, and his smile, when he managed it, was feeble. He glanced at Esmé uneasily, in interrogation. Esmé almost heard him ask whether or not she had been misbehaving herself in his absence. Mrs. Gregor M’Gregor also almost heard.

‘Oh, no,’ she declared swiftly ; ‘you needn’t look at your wife in that Adamish fashion, Niall. Esmé has been trying very hard to make up for your delinquencies . . . very much harder than you deserve. And I have been pitying her. I came to pity her, as I told her, and I’ll come again, my son, with more pity.’

She rushed on. . . . They all watched her in fascination, because it was a spectacle of wonder this single-handed wrestling with silence . . . the breathlessness of it awed them even while it relieved the horrid feeling of strain that the silence promised. Only there was the fear that some time or other she would have exhausted speech. . . .

‘As for you, Dulcie,’ she declared, ‘you are worse than Niall. You haven’t the excuse of fairies and tomfooleries like he has. When were you last in my house or in dear Jane’s house ? Eh ? Answer me that. And remember, we could have taught you

nearly everything that you don't know . . . and that 's a lifetime of knowledge, be sure . . . oh, you wise children, you wise children, who know so much that you don't need to learn anything of anybody. . . .'

Again her arm shot out in a gesture . . . the gesture seemed to exclude Esmé from the general condemnation. It also seemed to attempt mitigation of the fact that Esmé refused obstinately to look at Dulcie . . . Esmé's eyes were dangerous. They exercised a very uncomfortable effect on Niall, who refrained after a time from meeting them. Only Dulcie seemed quite self-possessed. The suggestion of little cherubs in her expression remained clear and delightful. She answered Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor with a smile :

'But you know, dear, we are all afraid. *The Miss M'Corquodale of the Lochs* is a very terrifying person really. When I was quite a little girl she stopped me once in the road, and said such terrible things . . .'

'Fudge! Poor Jane is most lovable. I know her. Only she has no patience with humbug. When you were a little girl, you were full of humbug, Dulcie . . . absurdly sentimental . . . like Niall. I would have spanked you both, and I told both your fathers so. They didn't thank me . . . oh, no. But they should have. Your dear father was much too kind to you . . . he spoiled you most dreadfully, I think.'

Dulcie laughed, and even Esmé allowed herself to smile. They all felt that Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor had won her battle, and that they owed her something pretty big for winning it. Niall got up and rang the bell.

'You must have some tea, really,' he said.

'Niall, you know quite well that I never drink tea.'

'But to-day . . .'

'Certainly not. At least we old fogies can keep our prejudices. Esmé dear, might I ask you for some whisky and water? It is very shocking, I know . . . but then old age *is* very shocking.'



Esmé ordered the whisky and water when the footman came. She gave Dulcie some tea. Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor informed Dulcie that she meant to drive her home, and went on to express her detestation of motor cars. She drank her whisky between sentences. Before any one quite realised it she and Dulcie were being piloted to the front door, and bestowed behind the tall black horses which drew the Gregor M'Gregor landau. . . . And then Niall and Esmé were alone together. Niall said :

'You were unkind to poor Dulcie, I think ; and I did hope you and she would be friends.'

He seemed to be speaking with considerable effort. Esmé drew her breath sharply.

'Do you mean to chose my friends for me, Niall ?' she asked.

He started, and the blood came into his face with a rush.

'No . . . but I think you might be kind. You know I was engaged to Dulcie, and . . . and . . . don't you think it was rather fine of her to come here at all ?'

'I don't think anything about it.'

'Esmé . . . it isn't worthy of you to behave like this.'

'No,' said Esmé, 'please don't touch me. I . . . I couldn't bear it.'

She moved away from him. He followed her a few paces, and then stopped.

'Oh, it's humiliating,' he cried. 'Esmé, you can't be jealous of Dulcie ! Didn't I give Dulcie up to marry you ?'

'You were jealous of Hal,' said Esmé unguardedly, 'when he sent me that poem.'

Niall flung out his hands. Reproof clearly was toward. Esmé heard the first sentence burst from his lips. Something about the difference between pride and covetousness. . . . She escaped to her room, leaving him in the throes of his travail. Both of them spent a very miserable evening.

## CHAPTER XIV

### EAU DE NIL

THE Territorial Ball happened a couple of days after Esmé received the Old Ladies. They hadn't been a very pleasant couple of days, and she was glad to find a temporary escape from them. The sense of being an awful failure gets painful after a time, especially when one wants very hard to be a success.

Esmé wore a blue frock of the colour known as *eau de nil*. When she came downstairs in the frock before they left home, Niall thawed a very little, and looked as if he wanted to kiss her. But he didn't. They drove along the moorland road in silence, each in a corner of the car. Not even their hands touched. Esmé guessed that Niall's speech on pride and covetousness was still rankling in his mind. Every time that he had tried to deliver it—and he had tried five times—she had got up and left the room. She wondered vaguely if he would be mean enough to take advantage of her present predicament to try a sixth time.

But no . . . he sat like a stone, with dignity upon his face, and that husband-of-one-wife look in his eyes, which she was beginning to understand. He never spoke a word. Esmé looked out over the driver's shoulder and saw the harbour lights of Tourntourq coming nearer.

She turned and flung herself into Niall's arms.

'Oh, please . . . I'm sorry,' she cried, adding with foolhardy innocence . . . 'and you may read me your lecture if you like. . . .'

She waited ; the arms she wished for did not come about her.

‘ Niall . . . ! ’

Still she clung to unresponsiveness.

She caught her breath in a gasp. In an instant she was back again in her corner of the car. He saw her face set into an expression that was nearly as threatening as his own.



## CHAPTER XV

### BELOW THE SALT

THE Drill Hall where the ball was held was decorated with flags, and there was a platform at one end on which the band—Walker's band in its red coats, to the delight of Nannie M'Clure—was perched. The guests lined the walls, regard being paid to their social quality in the matter of location. Thus Dalgleish, and Hal, and Mrs. Vericker, and the Deerings, and Colonel Lacourt, and Dulcie, were all gathered under the platform on the right side, while the 'merchants' of Tourntourq were on the left. The fisherfolk and farm hands came anywhere.

Niall's entry was 'the occasion of a demonstration' (as the local paper said the following Wednesday). There was a chastened cheer, and some hand-clapping as he and Esmé walked up the floor to join the party of the Right, and then there were a great many whispered remarks about Niall's good looks and Esmé's good luck. These remarks were occasionally just audible at the county end of the room, and they added spice to the vicious pleasantries with which Lady Deering greeted the couple (Lady Deering had finally and firmly decided not to carry out her purpose of obliterating Niall and his wife from the number of her acquaintances). They also added spice to the devouring worship of Hal's eyes as he raised them to Esmé's face.

The band played a reel, and by one means or another partners were found to dance it. Niall had Lady Deering—that seemed to afford him savage pleasure—Esmé had Dalgleish. A somewhat red-

faced and reluctant Hal danced with a very unreluctant Nannie M'Clure—to the envy of Lord Deering who didn't dance at all. Jack Deering was Mrs. Vericker's partner. When the dance was ended, every one was fetched back to the walls again with the exception of a few bold spirits who dared to go out together into the night. Hal sat down with Nannie in the merchants' corner, and was dumb for ten minutes, while Nannie tried to lead the conversation to their last meeting. The conversation was easily enough led, but when she got it there it was like the horse at the water. Hal didn't seem to remember their last meeting. . . .

The moment the band began again—a waltz this time—he escaped across the floor to Esmé.

Esmé and Hal made a pretty couple, as even Niall, who had Nannie M'Clure's mother in hand, observed. They also made an interesting couple, to one another, because Hal lost not a moment in pouring out his confession about Nannie into Esmé's ears. He told everything all at once in a kind of torrent of self-contempt, and wound up by describing himself as 'a blackguard and a cad.'

'But I couldn't help it. When I heard that you . . . had gone, I just didn't care any more.'

Esmé called him 'a silly boy' very kindly, and added: 'I showed your poetry to Niall, you know. He thought it was quite good. Have you written any more?'

'Oh, yes . . . lots more . . . I'll give you some when we sit down. . . . That's all I have left now . . . poetry.'

The melancholy of his voice as he said this caused Esmé to look over his shoulder. But she gave his hand a little squeeze.

'At least that is better than . . . Nannie,' she whispered.

'Oh, I suppose so. . . . After all what does it

matter ? I've lost you. Nannie is as good as any of the others.'

He glanced down and saw Esmé's lips bend. He added recklessly :

'I've half a mind to let it be Nannie. At least, I should shock everybody, and that might be a little satisfaction . . .'

'Not much. I've tried.'

He looked down again quickly at her face, and this time saw tears in her eyes. The arm that grasped her shoulders tightened. He whispered :

'Oh, my God ! . . . has it begun already ? I knew it . . . I knew it.'

'Hal, please . . . please . . .'

The band stopped playing. He led her to a seat at the far end of the room among the fisherfolk. He took a folded sheet of notepaper from his pocket and gave it to her. She noticed that his hands trembled very much. There were three verses written on the paper. Niall was watching them in the intervals of his conversation with Mrs. M'Clure. She laughed bitterly :

'I suppose one lives and learns,' she said inconsequently, ' . . . if one lives.'

The boy's face grew very red. He glanced across the room at Niall as if he wanted to get up and fight him, or something. Esmé began to feel alarmed. She glanced down at the sheet of notepaper he had given her, and read the first verse of the poem :

Not when your eyes, dear Love, looked into mine,  
Did I first know, as one by care forsaken,  
This grief that warmeth all my heart like wine,  
Or this new pain that hath of pleasure taken  
The breath of her red lips where kisses waken,  
Or young and sweet desire, so strong that I  
Reck not if life, her ramparts still unshaken,  
Fade like a moon out of the midnight sky,  
Or like a meteor burn and rush and die.



She said, 'I think that is rather good, Hal . . . ' and added quickly, 'Hal, don't be a fool. Let us talk about your poetry . . . anything.'

'I can't talk about my poetry.'

Several people were looking at them, and more were just going to look. Esmé read the next stanzas feverishly, trying to keep the boy from staring so wildly at her husband :

But when you touched my hand, and when you told  
In a light touch the story that all years  
Have misered up—a deep and mystic gold—  
Then from bare skies, as a swift star appears,  
Love came with eyes o'erbrimming with her tears,  
And set Oblivion to a tuneful song,  
And all the felon crew of doubts and fears  
Was thrust to its own darkness. . . . Come along  
Where Love so sweetly leads and stricken souls are strong.

Away from these wan shores. . . O Love, thy wings  
Are spread like flame across the Sun's white ray.

Our souls mount up as new created things,  
Leaping to life and light in ecstasy ;  
And music fills the dim and vaulted day,  
Like incense in the circumambient air.

Away, dear Love, from long regrets away  
Where Morn, with dewdrops gleaming in his hair,  
Welcomes escapéd Love from the pale night's despair.

'I think you have a distinct gift . . . if it is a wee little bit stiff here and there. . . . And I think I see . . . '

Esmé stopped because Niall was crossing the floor towards them, with every eye in the place watching him. She held the sheets in her hand, and looked up smilingly as he approached. He said :

'Esmé, I wish to introduce you to Mrs. M'Clure.'

He didn't even look at Hal.

Esmé got up and took his arm. On their way across the hall Niall whispered :

'This behaviour is unspeakable. . . . Everybody is watching you.'

Esmé was exceedingly polite to Mrs. M'Clure, and Nannie and all the other people she was introduced to. She held Hal's poem in her hand the whole time, crumpled up now into a ball. Her brain was whirling round and round. But she knew that Hal had risen and come back to the county set, and that he was still glaring at Niall in that awful way that had drawn so much attention to them. She managed to say to Niall :

'Will you please dance the next dance with me?'

Happily just then the band began again, and they were able to escape. Niall demanded :

'What were you reading that made that young ass look like that?'

'Only his poetry.'

They danced in silence, but Niall's face was a judgment.

Gradually the absurdity of the position forced itself on Esmé's mind. After all nothing had happened to call forth this exhibition of bad temper. If Hal chose to glare at her husband that was Hal's affair. It was ridiculous to make such a fuss over such a trifle. Anger and humiliation divided her feelings.

'I think it's awful to be so jealous,' she declared recklessly. 'You don't seem to care how much you make me suffer. . . .'

He was silent. The dance ended. He took her to Dalgleish and Mrs. Vericker. He had a look of anxiety in his eyes that was comical. Mrs. Vericker and Dalgleish exchanged glances. Dalgleish said :

'My dear Esmé, you have committed the unpardonable sin. You have dared to sit below the salt.' He laughed in a friendly way. Then his eye encountered Hal's gaze fixed upon him. He found a seat for Esmé as far as possible from temptation.

And meanwhile Mrs. Vericker had gone away on Jack Deering's arm to dance a reel,

## CHAPTER XVI

### BEAUTY AND BROKEN GLASS

THE trouble about people with theories of life is that they never seem to expect their theories to be put to practical test. Indeed when this happens they are apt to become irritable and hurt. Because so very few theories are framed with a knowledge of all the possibilities.

Niall's theories had been framed with a knowledge of very few of the possibilities, and as each new possibility cropped up his dismay increased. He began to realise that a wife is much more than a romantic interlude. As he sat looking at Esmé, after the Hal incident, he knew that a wife is a fact . . . one of those uncontrollable facts that get up and hit a man in the face. But even now he would not admit this to himself. He put the knowledge away from him, and wrapped himself in his chieftainship.

Esmé danced with anybody who asked her to dance, and, because she was very angry indeed, was very charming indeed. The 'merchants' who had the Highland faculty of social enjoyment, were delighted with her; they were just far enough removed from the clan atmosphere to be able to think of a Tournourq wife as a human being. The fact that they were not very far removed from it made them ready to admire her almost in any case. Butcher and baker and candlestickmaker, they paid her studied compliments, and paraded their social accomplishments before her like fat stock at a show. And when the heat and their pleasure made them sweat, they



mopped their big faces with big handkerchiefs, and were content.

Hal watched them with loathing, because in his present mood there seemed to be no excuse for life but the beauty it might be made to reveal. His eyes were haggard. The loveliness of Esmé hurt him like a knife: sentimental sorrow and sentimental rage surged within his soul. But for this night Esmé was lost to him. The look on Niall's face made Esmé afraid.

It was a look of some dignity, because chieftainship is an attitude of mind which affords escape from all kinds of ridiculous positions. (Perhaps that is one of the reasons why it was invented—so that ordinary people might not realise that great chiefs and leaders are ever ridiculous at all.) Also it was a look of some distress as though life had been found out and found wanting. But there was more in it than that. There was a queer, distraught kind of expression, as though something else, far away, was more real than the things round about and near.

This expression lasted all night until the ball ended, and he and Esmé were in the car again returning to Tourntourq. Esmé was getting more frightened because she felt that he was terribly angry with her, and she didn't know how to soothe his anger. The car seemed to be full of a sort of hidden fire that burned her eyes.

She put out her hand and touched his hand, in a despairing gesture. But he drew his hand away. She heard him gasp as though the action had outraged him. She shrank into her corner, watching with uncomprehending eyes the moon which had risen high in the sky. The white road uncoiled in a long ribbon in front of them. They swept up the hillside from the loch, and came out through a cleft in the rocks to the open sea. The sea was beautiful in the moonlight.

Suddenly Niall lifted the horn of the speaking tube and ordered the driver to stop. He opened the door of the car and got out, and stood holding the door open for Esmé to get out. Then he sent the astonished driver home, saying that he wanted a walk. The car swung away, a black speck along the white road. . . . They were alone.

Niall said, 'Come,' in his gentlest tones, and began walking along the road towards Tourntourq. The moon was so bright that Esmé could see his face quite clearly. The strange look was still in his eyes; it had deepened until his very individuality seemed to have faded in that gloom. He looked, she thought, like one of the pictures of the saints, only his kilt and buckles and the jewels on the daggers he wore gave a barbaric suggestion to his appearance. The contrast was startling. She was still rather afraid, but with her fear now excitement was mixed. Great curiosity to see what would happen made her forget part of the discomfort of walking in her high-heeled dancing shoes.

They came to a place where the road ran very near the top of the cliffs. Suddenly he stopped and turned towards the sea, indicating with a sweep of his arm its vast whiteness and the isles that lay upon its whiteness, like ink stains on a fair cloth. She heard him murmur to himself in low tones, but his words were indistinguishable.

And then he turned and put his hands on her shoulders, so that her face was brought into the full moonlight. He gazed at her. His eyes glowed. She watched him under half-closed lids. She did not feel frightened any more, because his face was so kind and gentle to her. It was also very sad and very wistful. She heard him sigh. And then suddenly he gathered her in his arms with an arm round her neck, so that her head rested on it. He almost crushed her against his breast, and the brass buttons on his tunic

hurt her flesh. They heard the hooting of an owl among the cliffs, and an answering hooting from far away. He bent down, whispering upon her lips a passion of love that was like a winter's stream on one of his hills. She closed her eyes in the wonder of this moment, yielding herself wholly to him. The scent of the heather, and the sound of the sea lapping and sucking among the rocks, and the owl hoots were blended in strange harmony.

He called to her to open her eyes, and she smiled and obeyed him. Niall's eyes were wonderful in their tenderness. She had not seen this look in his eyes before, and it thrilled her whole being. Joy, like a heavenly music, filled her spirit ; she seemed to be encircled in a mist of gold which shut out all her past, and all her future. There was nothing but his eyes in the world, and the love that shone in his eyes. He whispered : ' My girl . . . my dream girl. . . '

His voice thrilled her just as his eyes did. He spoke again, and told her in low tones what was in his mind . . . a very passion of kindness it was, but the effect on her was magic, like wine. He said :

' I have loved you since the world fell from God's hands. . . . Among the stars I loved you . . . and in the night-time, before the day was born out of her bosom. In great storms of darkness you were mine. . . . It is your eyes that I have seen in the dawning, and at sunset when the heaven is blue and green, and yellow, and orange, and crimson ; and the roses of my love are your lips ; and the lilies your cheeks. Your spirit is the perfume of the red rose and the lily-of-the-valley, of violets with dewdrops bejewelled, of Narcissus swooning in his fragrance. . . '

His voice rose and fell. At last it fell altogether, so that she could only just hear it. He kissed her lips again and again. After that he took her hand, and they wandered together along the edge of the cliffs in the moonlight with the sea and the hills for their



companions. He spoke to her still in his low voice of all that their love meant, of its origin in dim cells of the stars, and of its rushing, like a meteor, through the ageless years. There could be no end to it, because Love was everlasting, outburning the fragile forms it fed upon. Time and circumstance, and individuality were but accidents under the proud feet of Love. . . .

He stood still on the very edge of the cliff, and she came to his arms. Her cloak fell away, and revealed her slightly clad form. The moon touched her hair and the jewels she wore about her throat. He clasped her passionately.

Then, suddenly, he uttered a cry and sprang away from her, beating at the air with his hands, as though to ward off a threatening danger. . . . A great owl, which their coming had disturbed from its feasting among the cliffs, flapped heavily by him, striking him in the face with its wings. He stood shuddering by Esmé's side. Her dimly awakening brain heard him speaking of curses, and omens, and impending disaster. . . . She gazed about her with vague eyes, and then the dream was shattered.

'Niall,' she cried, 'you're trembling. . . . It was only an owl.'

He looked at her. But he did not speak. He was still shivering.

'Do let us get home,' she cried. 'I'm dreadfully tired and cold, and you are ill, I think.'

They walked back to the Castle, which was quite near. He took her into the dining-room, and forced her to drink some wine. His eyes were still full of shadows.

The wine revived her, and she grew impatient with him. Her weariness and the exhaustion of her senses fanned her impatience. She glanced up, and the light twinkled wickedly on the glass covering the portrait

of old Tourntourq. Old Tourntourq's face seemed to mock and sneer at her.

'Niall, dear, we are friends again, aren't we?' she asked a little anxiously.

Her voice seemed to arouse him. He turned on her with the look of gentleness utterly vanished from his eyes:

'Don't you think that after your behaviour with that boy to-night you owe me some sort of an apology now,' he demanded in chill tones.

'I owe you an apology? . . . What for?'

Esmé jumped up. Her eyes flamed. Her whole body seemed to vibrate.

He glanced at his father's portrait.

'I think the shame of it would have killed him,' he declared portentously.

For answer Esmé sprang at the picture with her doubled fists. Before he was able to prevent her she had smashed the glass with blows rained upon it in a frenzy of anger. The glass fell crashing in long spikes on to the floor.

Esmé's hands and arms were cut about. Trickles of blood began to flow from the cuts.

He caught her in his arms as she reeled back from the picture. He carried her to her bedroom, and waited beside her for a little while, until she was calmer. Unforgiveness had quenched every other expression in his eyes.

## CHAPTER XVII

### CHRYSLIS

IN love as in war there is a chrysalis stage, in which past triumphs or defeats are wrapped away and fresh enterprises engendered. Emotional stress is loosed that it may be stretched anew, dim processes of regeneration are effected, shadow and substance go to bed together.

This, more or less, was what happened after the moonlight adventure on the cliffs, and its sequel of broken glass and frayed tempers. The tide receded. Niall moved away from Esmé, and Esmé shrank away from Niall.

She employed her time in long, lonely walks, and in writing to a friend, who served as a kind of Aunt Sally for her moods. These letters were a relief, both because they allowed her to clear her own mind, and so arrive at some definite view of her relationship to Niall, and because they gave her a mental basis for future action.

An early letter, in which the affair on the cliffs was discussed at some length, showed that the meaning of Niall's behaviour was dawning upon Esmé. She wrote, for example :

' I fancy he enthralled me. He has got a power of that sort, I know. In fact, I feel it every time he comes into the room. Anyhow, I have the most confused idea of what happened. I only remember looking into his eyes and seeing wonderful things. His eyes were irresistible. They looked like lamps lighting to some wonderful country. (There is always that suggestion about him



of a wonderful country just beyond reach to which he may take you if he likes . . . oh, I don't know.) But now I have a clear, positive feeling that he didn't really want to take *me* there. It was only my face, my looks, what he calls "my beauty" that he wanted . . . I suppose he got it . . . you cannot imagine what a humiliating feeling it is in the retrospect . . . this knowledge that you are two things to a man, and not one thing, and that while he wants one part of you with all his soul, the other part is hateful to him—the better part.'

She added a little further on in the letter :

'But, please, don't think he is gross with me. . . . Nothing even like that. . . . I think I could bear grossness more easily: after all we women have our own protection against that sort of thing. No, it is a kind of refinement of passion, a worship, an idolatry almost. I am literally and truly his dream girl. . . .'

A letter written about a month later showed that as knowledge was becoming clearer, the sense of humiliation deepened.

'We have spent several weeks now, I scarcely know how many,' Esmé wrote, 'in a kind of cold and distant acquaintance. Niall is kindness itself so far as everything that doesn't matter is concerned. We go about. We see people. People come to see us. We rise in the morning and say, "How do you do?" at breakfast. We go to our separate rooms at night . . . (I often wonder what the servants must think of it all.) But, really, we are at war. I have got what Niall wants, and I won't surrender it. . . . I mean I have got my face, and hair, and eyes . . . and all the things these mean to him. . . .'

'I know I could have his love any day if I chose to capitulate. . . . I know that quite well. If I would surrender myself, my individuality, my tastes, my whims, and caprices; if I would only just play his game, think his thoughts, agree to his decisions, admire what he admires, and reject what he rejects, I should be his "dream girl" in an hour. We would have more adventures of

the Prince Charlie kind, and he would vow me the companion of his soul. . . .

‘But, dear, you are a woman, and you can see the price I should pay for that merry-making. . . .’

Esmé left it there, perhaps because she was not yet quite clear herself what price she would have to pay, perhaps because other ideas forced themselves on her mind. In any case her next letter scarcely mentioned Niall. It was devoted to Hal.

‘My dear Hal,’ it ran, ‘has gone to Woolwich as a cadet. So we are separated for the time. But he is continually in my thoughts. Hal touches the softer side of my life, but I am quite sure that he will never touch the deepest side. It is not so much my appearance with him as my feminine quality. I am a kind of pretty mother to him, I think : and he a sweet boy to me. There are the elements of a passionate romance here, but scarcely much more than that. Some of the lines in his poetry express what I mean very well :

Love came with eyes o’erbrimming with her tears,  
And set Oblivion to a tuneful song.

Away, dear Love, from long regrets away,  
Where Morn with dewdrops gleaming in his hair. . . .

and so on. Niall does not write poetry, I think. I believe it might be better if he did. Perhaps when Hal stops writing Niall will begin. . . .’

Some months later there was an angry letter, the result apparently not of any dispute with Niall, but of a dispute in Esmé’s own mind about him.

‘I think sometimes he is a mere coxcomb,’ she wrote, ‘and mad with his own conceit. I have noticed that when he is crossed in any way his moods are stirred up immediately. That drives me to distraction, because if he was only the child he behaves like, I would spank him. And perhaps not. Anyhow, I haven’t budged a foot, and all his efforts have been wasted. But oh, the humiliation !’

The next letter was sufficiently repentant. It ran :

‘I do confess his charm, his deep fascination. That shines through all the horrid murk of self-adulation. . . . I am acutely, almost physically, conscious of it. . . . It is this terrible sense of being robbed of myself, of being absorbed mind and spirit, of being blotted out as an individual. . . . Sometimes I feel that I must give in and just go and fling myself at his feet. But there is a something which holds me back. . . . (Oh, the weariness of this constant fight.) And I see the risks very plainly. Even now I know that he is going often to see Dulcie, you remember, his “love girl.” Dulcie will give him just the things I withhold. How he must wish that she had my face to give him also. . . .

‘Am I unjust and brutal to him? No, because I would give him my life quite readily, I know, if he really needed it. But I can’t give him my soul . . . I can’t . . . I can’t.’

In another letter this occurred :

‘If he really was only the coxcomb Dalglish says he is, then I believe I could forgive him, and just sink myself. . . . But I *know* that he isn’t. I know that far under all the fairyland stuff there is a great, deep place, a place where real mysteries dwell, where real miracles and wonders are waiting to be called to life. . . . Niall is capable of the greatest love, and he is capable of it with me . . . oh, if only I could show him . . . I seem to see so clearly to-day. I am in my gentle mood. But I will be petulant and contrary again to-morrow. . . . I cannot order myself . . .’

The last of this series of letters was dated 1 July 1914. It ran :

‘Niall has gone to London. This is the first time he has left me. We have never lived together since the night of our home-coming. But we parted friends . . . at least. Things are exactly as they were . . . but if I am going to keep up this fight I shall have to do something :



my recklessness is coming back on me. I can't passive resist any longer. . . .

'I have just heard that Mrs. Vericker, of whom I wrote you, is engaged to Jack Deering. This will be a great blow to Dalgleish. I do not like Mrs. Vericker much, but I think I can guess why she is marrying Jack and not Dalgleish . . . one could only marry Dalgleish in a church. Jack, as a husband, will need very little more attention than a schoolboy. And when he does grasp any higher ideal he will be so pleased . . . it will be like teaching a child to walk to be married to him. Perhaps I should be ashamed to confess it, but sometimes I almost wish I hadn't broken off my engagement to him after all. We should have had what is called "a healthy, wholesome, married life." I wonder if the "big things" really do matter so much as we think, and if they are worth all the misery I have been through. Anyhow, I wish Jack luck, and I bear him no grudge. He is simply a boy with an appetite. . . .

'Queer, isn't it, I have experienced three quite different types of love. . . . And not one of them is the real thing. . . . I am quite sure that not one of them is the real thing. . . .

'*P.S.*—A telegram has just arrived from Hal. He is coming up here in a day or two to stay for the season. I hear that Dulcie has gone to London, too, to stay with friends in Kensington.'

## CHAPTER XVIII

### ‘ DRY ME ’

NIALL left home in the frame of mind of a man who relinquishes an unequal struggle, meaning to return to it again. He travelled overnight, but was unable to get a berth in the sleeper. The resulting discomfort aggravated his distress of mind, and the night became a confused delirium of rushing wheels and rushing, tormenting thoughts.

Uppermost among these thoughts was the knowledge that the Esmé he had supposed himself to be marrying, and the Esmé he had in fact married, were two different women. The ideal Esmé was a sensation, the real a series of baffling, immediate problems. The real Esmé thwarted his enjoyment of the ideal at every turn. His dream girl was awake ; and it was not his kiss which had awakened her. If only he could put her to sleep again. . . .

The natural end of this train of ideas was anger against women in general for belying their own beauty. A woman's beauty awakened in a man high and noble aspirations ; the woman herself dragged him down to the most dreary commonplaces. She was the enemy of all of the romance associated with herself. He thought that Esmé had rebelled against the customs of his house which were very dear to him ; she had insulted his chieftainship, made him an object of ridicule, finally even outraged him by her attack on his father's portrait. . . . The reason, he concluded grimly, was her jealousy. Of all the things in his life that he valued, she was jealous even to the extent

of being jealous of herself. . . . That accounted for her attitude to Dulcie.

It was in this fashion that man was always demeaned and humiliated by women . . . women who seemed to promise him so much more than all others. . . . He thought of the Syrens, of Venus, of Samson and Delilah. . . . In all ages men of imagination had felt this subtle attraction, an attraction potent as Heaven, and in all ages they had learned that it is a chimera. From the hour when Mother Eve lost Paradise to mankind, woman had preferred her hearth to any Elysium of man's conceiving. . . .

He thought vengefully of the old story of Eden, seeing in it a meaning which had escaped him before. The story of Eden was the story of every marriage . . . the story of a dream and an awakening. God and man were the dreamers, Paradise their conception, woman the crowning wonder of Paradise . . . and then . . . He recalled the words of the chronicle :

‘ And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the Lord God called unto Adam. . . . And the man said, “ The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me . . . ” ’

So the dream was dissipated.

The vast absurdity—what he felt to be the vast absurdity—of marrying these dream faces, rushed upon his mind. A man should marry mere womanhood, the stuff that children are made of, the stuff of snug love and creature comfort ; or he should marry a companion who would share his everyday life, leaving his dreams unfettered ; or he should marry money, or influence, or even personality. . . .

He began to think of Dulcie.

When he met Dulcie in London a few days later, at the house of one of his friends, he was still thinking about her. The meeting was not quite accidental, but neither was it quite a matter of arrangement.



He knew Dulcie was in town, and he knew that she was very likely indeed to spend some of her time with the O'Mearas. He went to the O'Mearas. . . .

That first meeting did not disturb matters far from their equilibrium, but it led to a second meeting at one of the O'Mearas' garden parties . . . a big party, which included Mr. Merridew, the Cabinet Minister, among its guests. (Mr. Merridew and Niall recognised one another very formally indeed.) Niall tried to tell Dulcie some of the things he had been thinking, and because he had been thinking too much and too furiously, he told her very badly. Dulcie said :

'That is what girls of fifteen call "talking deep," isn't it?'

She was eating strawberries which he had brought her, and her eyes were not encouraging. However, he persisted. He declared that he thought every man should possess at least two wives, because every man had at least two natures, and more in that strain. . . .

'A love girl and a dream girl. . . . My dear Niall, aren't you getting tired of that stuff? . . . I mean, don't you expect to grow up some day . . . ?'

She bent down over her plate, but watched him closely. When her raillery made him look blank, she smiled. It was rather a sad smile. . . .

'"That stuff," as you call it,' he declared, 'is the whole philosophy of marriage.'

'Perhaps . . . but who ever married a philosophy?'

'I know, that's just it. One marries an ideal.'

He was very much inclined to be portentous and dull. Dulcie recognised that so far he had seen only one side—his own—of the business of his marriage. She discounted the pleasure his confession gave her, and managed to harden her heart. Her voice held the crisp, cutting quality it had lately assumed.

'So many men say that, I think,' she remarked. 'I'm afraid my conception of marriage has always been hopelessly debased. If I had been a man I

should probably have married just a wife or something. . . . I don't think I should have expected very much more than I was likely to get.'

'No . . . that is the only way . . . that *is* the only way.'

'One of the ways. . . . Didn't you tell me you thought it "bovine," or some such thing . . . ?'

'Oh, that was long ago.'

He grew silent, annoyed at her flippancy. She saw his trouble, and pitied him without in the least sharing his point of view. The real wisdom of his marriage began to dawn upon her. Esmé had already set agoing a process of change in his mind which she would never have accomplished in years of married life. If he had married her, he would have found contentment. . . . It was a bitter thought, and she put it away from her. She asked :

'Is a dream no good unless it comes true the next morning ? You refuse to learn your craft, my dear Niall. Making dreams come true can't be a picnic exactly. . . .'

'Seeing them come false is even less of a picnic.'

'What a tragedy . . . to doubt one's dreams,' she cried, laughing.

He did not join in her laughter. Very soon he went away. Dulcie sat where he had left her, in a corner of the garden. . . . There were tears in her eyes, because she was thinking that it was always to Esmé that it was given to push Niall into the water. . . . And she would have no more of helping to dry him. . . .

The hard look—the look that Dulcie's friends would not have recognised—came again into her eyes.

## CHAPTER XIX

### GHOSTS

JACK DEERING's second engagement gave his mother no more satisfaction than his first engagement had done. Lady Deering's views about widows were as definite as could be: she regarded them all as man-eaters. So she received the news about Mrs. Vericker coldly, and made no haste to call upon Mrs. Vericker. Jack Deering, now disillusioned and *blasé*, came to the conclusion that he did not care in the least what his mother thought or did.

He spent a great deal of his time—he had unlimited time—in Mrs. Vericker's company, and Mrs. Vericker taught him, and taught him just as if she was being paid so much a lesson. Teaching him gave her a fine warm feeling of duty done and debt paid, and that was the feeling she wanted most of all, because the real purpose of her life just at the moment was laying her husband's ghost.

It was an interesting experience for both of them at the beginning. Jack Deering was able to relieve his feelings and work off some of his quite real desire for Esmé . . . vicarious love-making has its points . . . while Mrs. Vericker felt as if she was laying flowers on a dear grave. She never allowed her mind to stray from that thought. They discussed the meaning of love as they might have discussed the meaning of an ancient papyrus.

Her philosophy, the outcome of long thought about her husband, was that happiness consisted in being natural. When you wanted to kiss you kissed; and



the more the better. People who didn't kiss when they wanted got all kinds of wrong ideas in their heads, and these ideas led to cruelty and bitterness and disillusionment. You had to let yourself go to get anywhere.

'That was my awful mistake,' she declared one afternoon, when they sat together in her garden. 'I thought feelings were given to be suppressed, and so . . . and so . . .'

Jack nodded even more solemnly than she was nodding.

'Esmé thought that,' he declared in melancholy tones. . . . 'Kissing Esmé was like kissing an icicle . . .' (But he sighed nevertheless at the thought.)

'Esmé,' said Mrs. Vericker, a little viciously, 'is one of those girls who make love to the wrong man in order to annoy the right one.'

Mrs. Vericker checked herself, because that wasn't exactly a flower that could be laid upon the grave. She added gently :

'It's so difficult for a child to enter into grown-up sentiments.'

'I like children very much,' said Jack inconsequently.

They mourned through the afternoon. When he was going away, she kissed him, and got hugged in return, a kind of cry-baby hug, because the boy couldn't have what he really wanted. The utter futility of it all stabbed her. But she set her teeth.

Dagleish came just after Jack had gone, and then all the flowers, and wreaths, and things were put away hurriedly. . . . She welcomed Dagleish as one welcomes the sun after a day of rain. . . . It was like getting back to her world again, because since she had rejected him, they had returned to their old friendship.

'My dear . . . dear, I am so tired. . . . Come and

console me or cheer me. . . . But you look tired too. . . . I'm sorry.'

He sat down beside her, smiling at her humour. He had the look of a man who knows that he must wait a long time, and is ready to wait till the very end of time. She saw that he had something on his mind, and thrilled as the possibilities presented themselves. But his first words froze all her anticipations.

'I have just been to see Esmé. It is terrible what that child is going through. . . .'

'What is she going through?' Mrs. Vericker asked coldly.

Dalglish frowned. He resented her attitude, and wished her to know that he resented it. He would have her live up to his ideal even if he must quarrel with her about it.

'She is learning,' he said, in stubborn tones, 'that to be valued only for your pretty face is to have insult and humiliation heaped on your soul.'

He met her eyes steadily, and they fell before his gaze. She felt a little ashamed of her petulance, a little uneasy because his honesty allowed her no loop-hole of escape. She said:

'Yes . . . I think I understand.'

'Think?'

'I mean that kind of love is not very much good, is it—in the long run? . . . .'

'It is no good at all at any time. No love is any good that doesn't include the . . . the other part. But that isn't the whole tragedy of this business. . . .'

He broke off, and was silent a moment. She watched him without interrupting him, because her curiosity at the moment was busy with her own case and the application of his philosophy to that. Her own case was not so greatly different from Esmé's case. At last he declared:

'Esmé believes that Niall really does care. She may be right. But the fellow is so obsessed with his

fairy tales and rubbish that he cannot see his own mind. The danger that he may never see it at all is great. . . .’

Mrs. Vericker smiled and touched his arm playfully.

‘Then why not teach him?’ she asked. ‘There are ways of making blind men see things, my dear Dalgleish. . . . And I think Esmé is capable of finding them.’

He shook his head.

‘Esmé is more of a child than you suppose. There is something very, very wonderful about Esmé’s childishness.’

Again he was silent. She thought that he was thinking of Esmé, and experienced a twinge of annoyance. This girl was dangerous above all other girls she had encountered. She wondered why, because after all, on the score of pure prettiness, Esmé did not greatly outshine a hundred others. Probably it was the wistful expression in her eyes that won so much sympathy. She was still debating the matter when Dalgleish added :

‘Her childishness seems to me so entirely part of her nature. . . . She is a child, in her whole being, in her impulsiveness and her kindness and her wish to be liked and petted. There is a heavenly quality too that is compelling. . . .’

He glanced up, and saw that Mrs. Vericker was laughing. That made him exclaim :

‘My fear is that her childishness may overcome her common sense. Children are so apt to precipitate earthquakes.’

She did not reply. She was thinking how strange it was that he had never even referred to her engagement to Jack Deering, though he had known about it for a month at least. He had just gone on as if nothing at all had happened. She wondered if that was because he disbelieved in its reality or if . . . The memory of her husband seemed a shadowy thing just now ; she even began to resent the idea that she owed anything to his memory.



## CHAPTER XX

### BABES IN THE WOOD

HAL came back from Woolwich with quite a number of new ideas. They were fresh clean ideas, just a little tinted with sunsets, because even in the polish with which he cleans his buttons before every parade, the better sort of cadet mixes a little of the sunset. On the other hand, his boyishness had developed and grown more robust. He was a little less sentimental, a little more conventional, a little more intolerant of ways and methods not sanctioned by Army usage.

Dalglish, who received him very gladly indeed, welcomed the change as a sign of moral and physical well-being; Mrs. Vericker also welcomed it—not without a sigh. The old Hal had a gentleness which the new Hal lacked.

Only Esmé noticed no change when the boy came to see her the day after his arrival. Niall was still in London, and she was still very lonely and very bitter. Hal's coming was like water to a thirsty, wounded man. She saw nothing but the kind spirit of the lad eager to bring her worship and happiness.

They went out on the cliffs, and walked side by side for a while without speaking, because both of them had longed so passionately for this hour in the dark days that now that it was come they did not know where to begin, to speak. . . . They touched hands once or twice, as the Babes in the Wood may have done just to comfort their loneliness: worlds and worlds of make-believe seemed to roll away from their spirits. It was getting back to childhood again, to the security

and freedom of the nursery. It was kissing the sore place, and making it better. It was giving up the game of pretending to be grown up.

They sat down in a tufted hollow right above the sea, and he sprawled on the grass beside her looking up in her face. All the worship of the boy was in his eyes veiling the will of the man. His eyes proclaimed that sisterhood and motherhood were united in her person . . . and love still young enough to be lonely and breathless. . . . He cried suddenly :

‘ Oh, why did you ? Why did you ? ’ in tones that made tears come into her eyes.

Esmé shook her head. She brushed the tears away. She wanted to be allowed to forget those other things altogether until it was necessary to think about them. She wanted to stay in her little girlhood with its dolls and puppy dogs and tea parties and little short frocks and brushed hair and clean hands and things . . . with its delicious troubles and stiffnesses and fun . . . with its narrow, safe walls and its dim, dim horizons away beyond the nursery windows, that need not be looked at if you didn’t want to look at them . . . with its vague, awful dangers like thunder and wet feet and fibs and its rare moments of exaltation begotten of penny cakes, and trips to the seaside, and Punch and Judy shows, and . . .

She was aroused by Hal, who found it difficult to leave the present alone.

‘ Please, dear,’ she begged, ‘ I can’t bear to think of those things. I’m so tired and so miserable. I want you to . . . to make me happy. Just let’s be kids. . . . O Hal ! if we could only be kids again. If there wasn’t any life to be lived and any . . . oh, I don’t know.’

He got up, and put his arm round her in schoolboy fashion, so that there was nothing to resent at all. He did his very best to suppress the sentimental tide that rose up every minute to the back of his throat.

He told her about Woolwich, and the cleaning of buttons.

‘You must use “Soldiers’ Friend” you know, and then a rub with a hard brush does the trick,’ and the saluting of officers ‘no matter how far away they are,’ and a hundred other things out of his daily round. He had his heroes of course—men of the clean, well-groomed type, good at games, strict disciplinarians, and he described them to her, and made her laugh at their eccentricities and the funny stories about them that get repeated from boy to boy. All the gossip of ‘the shop’ was remembered, and retailed, down to the story of the famous brew of punch that was made one New Year’s Eve in the big silver punch-bowl the mess butler kept his plate powder in.

Esmé smiled at first, and then she laughed, and her laughter gradually got the good, gay sound that is in children’s laughter, because he made her forget and forget. When she laughed like that she looked like a flower after rain has fallen, and her eyes were full of sparkles all about their wistfulness like diamonds about a beautiful woman’s brows. She was so lovely that once when he glanced at her he gasped out loud . . . and that made her laugh too, only less gaily than she had been laughing.

‘Dear Hal,’ she whispered, ‘I think you are the goodest and best boy in all the world.’

They strolled back as the sun was setting into the sea. He showed her all the glory of it with a sweep of his arm, and she read the deeper glory in his face, in his eyes, and his parted lips.

Esmé gave his arm a little squeeze that he vowed in his soul he would remember for ever, so gentle and friendly was it. They came back to the Castle, and he left her. The servant at the door told her that Lady Deering was in the drawing-room. He added :

‘She has been waiting nearly an hour, ma’am.’



Esmé nearly didn't go to the drawing-room because she hated to meet Lady Deering so much. But in the end she went with her upper-lip stiff, and her eyes having all the light damped out of them. This was Lady Deering's first call since her marriage.

Lady Deering was annoyed at being kept waiting, but her expression told that she would have waited even longer rather than go away without saying what must be said. There was a 'what-must-be-said' gleam in her eye, a thing of sharpened duty like a hatpin. She rose when Esmé came into the room, and advanced upon her. She said :

'My dear child, I was afraid I had missed you altogether.'

Esmé muttered something which sounded quite polite and offered Lady Deering tea. Lady Deering accepted the tea. Then she opened the matter she had come to talk about. It appeared that her dear Mr. Merridew, 'the Cabinet Minister, you know,' had written her a letter from London. The letter concerned Esmé.

Esmé got rather red at the mention of Mr. Merridew, but she managed to stop getting red in time to save her self-respect, and the arrival of the footman with the tea-tray gave her an excuse for getting her back to the window. Lady Deering went on :

'It was a most sad letter, I think, my poor child, but not unexpected, I'm afraid. From the beginning I had very grave anxiety as to what the upshot would be. . . . In fact I told dear Colonel Lacourt this afternoon that I had anticipated something of the sort.'

Esmé spilt some tea in filling Lady Deering's cup. She glanced at Lady Deering's leathery old face, and was afraid. Lady Deering's face looked like one of old Tourntourq's dining-room chairs ; it had the same suggestion of revengeful gravity. Esmé asked :

'Do you take two lumps of sugar, or just one ?'

‘One, please.’

Esmé brought the cup to Lady Deering herself, and then, because the footman stood waiting, told him to go. She offered Lady Deering scones and cake. When that was all done, she poured out some tea for herself, still keeping her back to the window. Lady Deering said :

‘I think it is difficult for a man to break his old habits,’ in threatening tones.

She paused, evidently expecting Esmé to agree with her. Esmé only smiled. She added :

‘A man’s habits are all so bad, I think. Every man is the heir to hundreds of bad habits that nothing in the world can eradicate. . . . It is so sad that even the best men are slaves to their habits.’

She paused, like a dog barking along the edge of a stream it dares not as yet plunge into. Esmé looked at her with wonder, anxious to know what was coming . . . a little surprised that Lady Deering should hesitate over any unpleasant thing.

‘Oh,’ she said indifferently, ‘I think men’s habits are rather nice . . . smoking and . . .’

Lady Deering girded herself.

‘My dear, I refer to their habits of mind. And the habit of every man’s mind is a woman. Now do you understand?’

‘No,’ said Esmé blamelessly.

‘But you know who was . . . your husband’s habit of mind, don’t you, before he met you?’

Lady Deering wilted at the end of her sentence. She seemed to drown in silence. Esmé set her face to look at Lady Deering. Esmé’s face was a little pale, and so a little more wistful than usual.

‘I . . . I think you must explain that to me quite plainly, Lady Deering,’ she said . . . ‘what you mean. . . .’

Lady Deering said : ‘I mean that Mr. Merridew tells me that your husband and Dulcie Lacourt are

going about together a great deal in town. Poor dear Colonel Lacourt was so distressed when I told him. He has ordered Dulcie to come home, and . . .’

Esmé laughed then, and Lady Deering was checked. Esmé said :

‘I know,’ deliberately, and added : ‘and I’m so glad. You see, Niall and I have made up our minds to be quite free to do as we like—we trust each other rather completely. . . .’

Esmé’s voice fell to a lower tone, like a ship sinking. But it kept afloat all the same. Esmé’s eyes shone.

‘I wouldn’t, dear,’ Lady Deering cried, trying one more shot, ‘it is so unsafe to trust any man.’

Lady Deering was whipped. Esmé said :

‘I am very very sorry for you, Lady Deering. I could almost like you, because I am so sorry for you.’

Then a queer thing happened. Suddenly Lady Deering’s tanned old face changed all to bits. You saw another face that was young and fresh and sweet coming under her ugly, expensive hat. . . . Only the young-girl face was slashed over and scarred over with neglect and disappointment and hunger and weariness . . . all the things that a woman finds when she doesn’t find love. . . . Lady Deering began to cry rather humbly, into her handkerchief . . . not the way she cried when Esmé wouldn’t have the mustard leaf put on, but a different way altogether, that came from years ago when you wouldn’t have believed anything but sweetness of Lady Deering. . . .

Esmé rushed and put her arms round Lady Deering’s neck.



## CHAPTER XXI

### 'GO AND FIND OUT'

WHEN Lady Deering went away, Esmé ordered the car, and told the driver to take her to Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor's place. It was nearly six o'clock, but she did not fear that she would be less welcome on that account. Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor was one of those women who have vanquished the time-table.

The car rode into the Western sun, and the light touched Esmé's face. So you could see the pain in her eyes and about her mouth . . . and the fear. But her eyes were quite brave, and her mouth was firm. Esmé was not running to Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor to be slobbered over.

That was just what struck Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor when Esmé walked into the drawing-room. Because though she was very old Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor was also very young; and she had a mind that she described herself as a 'corkscrew because, my dear, though it seems to be going round and round, it's going straight on all the time.' When Esmé had kissed her—girls always kissed Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor instinctively—she said in her puffed-and-blown old voice :

'Sit you down, my dear . . . sit you down . . . I know . . . I know . . . and I'm so really glad you've come.'

Esmé sat down close to Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor, and told her straight out all her trouble about Niall and Dulcie, and Niall and herself, and Lady Deering, and how Lady Deering had taken the news to Colonel

Lacourt, and everything else, except Lady Deering's breakdown. Esmé didn't feel equal to telling about that. When she had finished there seemed to be a comfortable silence in the room that you could wait for help in without being impatient of its coming, because it was so sure to come. At last Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor said :

‘Niall's the biggest baby of the lot,’ in such positive tones that Esmé couldn't help laughing.

‘He is,’ Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor exclaimed angrily. ‘I know him. . . . All this tomfoolery about dreams. That's at the bottom of the whole business, child, and always will be. . . . Dreams indeed!’ (But Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor's voice had a softer quality just then.) ‘As if he hadn't got a sweet enough dream under his own roof . . .’ she snapped off.

‘Oh, he calls me his “dream girl,” you know.’

‘Does he? I can't abide that talk . . . that worship of prettiness—it's nothing else—which shuts a man's eyes to the real things of life. And Niall didn't invent it either by many a hundred years though it would vex him a great deal to know it. . . . Prettiness, forsooth, the bait that catches scullions, and always will catch 'em. . . . Dear, dear, take an old woman's word for it, Niall's in the feeding-bottle stage of his love-making yet.’ (She gave a sudden, vigorous chuckle.) ‘Nobody under the age of sixty, I do believe, knows what love is. You have to wait till the gilt is all worn off before you can taste the gingerbread. There, there, come and sit closer, and let me look at you.’

Esmé came. She took Esmé's face in her two hands, and gave the girl a good stare that was not a bit disconcerting. At last she turned away.

‘Just you keep on loving him,’ she advised suddenly, ‘and then you needn't be afraid to let yourself go. Going means coming most times in cases like yours . . . anyhow, love isn't sitting in armchairs

. . . . better fight. How can you know you're in love unless you try, eh ?'

'Try what ?' said Esmé, when Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor had been silent long enough to make it clear that she didn't mean to explain herself further.

'Not being in love, of course. If you weren't in love with Niall how would you treat him.'

'I don't know really.'

'My dear, go and find out.'

Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor seemed almost to go to sleep after that. Esmé thought she was asleep, because her head nodded, and her hands looked quite limp. But soon she roused herself again to repeat :

'Go and find out . . . go and find out . . . ' a great many times, always in just the same tone of voice. Esmé rose to leave.

'I think you are very, very kind,' she said gently and hopelessly.

Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor chuckled again. But she didn't accept the slight challenge in Esmé's manner. Either her pity was dried up, or she considered the time inappropriate for pity. At any rate she shook hands without saying any more. Esmé drove back home feeling that, after all, Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor had failed her. She went to bed as soon as she reached the Castle.

Next morning a letter came from Niall. It ran :

'MY DEAR DREAM GIRL,—Since I left you I have been in dark places seeking light on this trouble that lies between us. And I have not found it. I have not even found it in talking to Dulcie whom I met here, though I thought I might have done . . . still, still it seems as if you refused me admittance to your soul. . . .'

Esmé exclaimed impatiently at this stuff. She skipped a turgid paragraph, and read on :

'You have refused to adventure with me, have you not ? I pipe to you but you will not dance ; I mourn



but you will not weep. What remains to us beyond the dream of your beauty? The tragedy deepens about me. I seem to have staked all and lost because I have not found you. If you loved me would you hurt me? O dream girl, is that not crystal clear—if you loved me you could not wish to hurt me. . . . But perhaps . . . perhaps . . .’

The letter ended there. It was signed with the accustomed big, sprawling ‘N.’

Esmé held it in her hand a moment after she had finished reading it. Then she tore it to small pieces, and stamped on it. The pieces scattered all over the floor, and so Hal walked on some of them when he was shown into the room a few minutes later.

## CHAPTER XXII

### DONE AND NOT DONE

COLONEL LACOURT met Dulcie at the pier when she came back from London. She noticed at once how stern he looked, and she guessed the nature of the discussion they were likely to have when they got home. Evidently Lady Deering had done her work thoroughly.

The discussion needed closed doors, for Colonel Lacourt was careful to see that both the doors—green baize doors they were—of his gun-room were closed before he spoke what was in his mind. When this had been secured he turned to Dulcie, and demanded why she had so forgotten herself as to afford an opportunity of scandal.

He stood some little distance from her, drawn up to his full height, as if he was on parade. He had a 'God-save-the-King' kind of expression on his face. Dulcie said :

'Don't you think, father, that you have treated me very unkindly in believing that woman before you know anything of the circumstances of the case?'

There was a curious hard ring in her voice that was like a death-bell tolling for all the little babies. . . .

'You do not deny that you were seen in the fellow's company?' said Colonel Lacourt, in the tones of a public prosecutor.

'Of course not. What has that got to do with . . . with anything?'

He strode away from her to the window and back again. His distress seemed to ferment inside of him.

The fact that he had never once doubted his own ability to judge a situation made his trouble almost unendurable. (That is a penalty of being decently brought up.) Life was divided into things that were, and things that were not 'done.' The things that were not done couldn't be done, and so they didn't need to be considered. The possibility that they might be done—and by his own daughter—had never once occurred to him. It was like having his favourite mare jib, or . . . He cried vehemently :

'What has that got to do with it? Oh, it is impossible that you should be so blind . . . so lacking in dignity. To go about with a fellow who has only just jilted you in the most despicable fashion . . .'

He broke off, overwhelmed by this sin against his deities. Done and Not Done had known no such outrage at the hands of his family since his family emerged from darkness.

Dulcie looked at him reproachfully, almost as if she wondered how he could have come to be her father. The thought crossed her mind that he had been swindled out of his life by his code, and had never discovered that he had been swindled. He was as easily parted from his life as the proverbial fool from his money. . . . She said :

'Niall did not jilt me, as you call it. It was I who broke off the engagement.'

'We need not discuss that again, I think.'

'Yes, because that is why I can remain his friend.'

He gazed at her in deepening suspicion. There was a quiet assurance in her manner that was as unexpected as it was disconcerting. The thought flashed through his mind that possibly she might not yet be persuaded that he knew better than she did. But he dismissed it curtly.

'Need I remind you that he is now a married man?' he demanded.

'I can't see what that has to do with it,'



‘Dulcie!’

Colonel Lacourt recalled those Biblical characters with an aptitude for rending their clothes. The rents were in his eyes, at the corners of his mouth. He glared round, seeming to appeal to an invisible congregation of fellow-worshippers of his twin god. In tones that dried his throat, he added:

‘It is not possible that you still . . . that you allow yourself to . . . think about him . . .?’

‘If you mean am I still in love with Niall, of course I am,’ said Dulcie, in practical tones.

He took a step away from her. His face was piteous.

‘It is terrible, I think,’ he said.

Dulcie looked a little frightened, but more surprised than frightened. With all the little babies dead, surely this was a small, small matter. Could he not see that her life depended now on what was left to her out of the ruins of her love? She came to him, and put her hand on his arm, ignoring the movement of recoil this gesture evoked in him.

‘Daddy, how can I help my feelings? A year ago you didn’t think it was wicked to be in love with Niall. I have not done anything to make me different since he left me.’

‘He has married another woman.’

‘Yes . . . but that doesn’t affect my side of the matter. I . . . I . . . didn’t just love him because he was a bachelor, because he might marry me some day . . . oh, that had nothing whatever to do with it!’

She looked up in his face with the wonder deepening in her expression. Was it possible that he really didn’t understand . . . that for him love meant just marriage and life together under the same roof . . . just a kind of code of honour arrangement between a man and a woman?

‘My poor child,’ he said, not unkindly, ‘you don’t

know what you are talking about. The kind of love you mean has ruined hundreds of women . . . hundreds of thousands of them. The only safe course, believe me . . .’

She interrupted him with a cry of repudiation.

‘I do not care a straw for safe courses . . . yes, I *know* that . . . that it was worth it. I mean for your hundreds of thousands of women.’

She moved a little away from him. Her face was eager now, and her eyes shone. He thought that there were tears in her eyes. She cried :

‘You don’t understand me . . . you don’t, you don’t. Because you have never been in love, Daddy. Being in love has nothing to do with dignity, or honour, or money, or marriage, or conventionality, or anything. . . . Being in love is like . . . death.’

‘Dulcie, I forbid you to talk in this way. I am ashamed.’

Her body lost its tense attitude ; she bent a little apparently in submission. . . . There were the dead baby faces like a white wreath about her brows. Her father added :

‘I am very sorry for you . . . very, very sorry. This fellow has done you a great wrong, I know, and I suppose you have not yet recovered your equilibrium. It was foolish of me to let you go to London alone.’

‘Niall did me no wrong. Would you have liked me to marry him knowing that he didn’t care for me ?’

He frowned :

‘It is not a question of caring at all,’ he declared bitterly. ‘This mixing up of emotions with duty is sheer ruin. . . . On the same grounds anything might be justified . . . free love, divorce, anything . . .’

He glanced at her again, with more composure now that he had placed her and her opinions definitely in the nursery. His face expressed the view that he had the necessary firmness and kindness at disposal

to deal with the situation. There was a 'you'll-thank-me-when-you're-older' look on his face.

Dulcie left him and went to her room. She lay down on the bed, and cried all the tears that he had wakened out of her brain. But she was not nearly so miserable as he supposed she was, or as she expected to be. There was a kind of joy transfused through her misery, like spirit through water. Niall was not lost, only relinquished. Esmé was more necessary to him at the moment than she was. This time Esmé could plunge him into her troubles and dry him, when he got out again, all by herself. And after Esmé had spent her full effort on him he would come back.

The thought made her gasp. Because at first in London, she had felt that he was lost for ever. That was when she realised that Esmé was working an evolution in his character. She had not recognised then that Esmé's powers were very limited after all. Esmé was a child with a child's whims and petulances : there were no deeps in her character. And when his first delight in Esmé, and his first bitterness against her—those two feelings were complementary—had passed, Niall would demand deeps—he would demand and obtain them.

Her mind drifted along byways of love's history. She thought of the famous love-affairs of the world, and saw her own story in those stories of pain and passion—the stories of Flora MacDonald, of Highland Mary, of La Vailliere, of Nell Gwynne, of Lady Hamilton. Flora MacDonald and Lady Hamilton were the supreme examples ; their love beaconed across the years. That last letter of Nelson's to his beloved Emma ! What wifehood that the world ever bestowed was comparable to that splendour. Her eyes shone ; but the look that Dulcie's friends would not have recognised burned deep in her shining eyes . . . a look that might mean anything at all, and that might go on meaning it almost to any distance.



## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MOST UNKINDEST CUT

As the child finds the child, Esmé and Hal found one another in the days after Lady Deering's visit. It was a case of piping and dancing, of mourning and winning sympathetic tears. They wandered hand-in-hand by many danger places ; love followed them ; but their eyes were clear.

Esmé was ready to confess that she had suffered disillusionment—though her confessions lacked conviction. Hal was ever ready to hear her confession. He was too inarticulate as yet to help in the elucidation of the tangle of her feelings, but he made up for that by his kindness. His kindness belonged to the gentle order ; and yet it was passionate kindness. He did not ask for love ; such as he had he gave.

The danger was obvious enough, and Esmé saw it. But she saw it without fear, and with intention to face it. Her days of waiting upon Niall were over. Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor's advice to 'go and find out' was becoming intelligible now. Niall must fight for his own, or . . .

She waved the alternative away from her, because the alternative was unpleasant when called by names. Instead, she listened to Hal, and imbibed draughts of the heady stuff he offered. It was not at all unlike Niall's talk ; but there was a difference :

'The only things that matter in life are dreams,' he told her one day, when they were watching the breakers dashing themselves into white columns of

spray on the rocks at their feet, 'all the rest is just mud shovelling. Can we eat more than horses? Or sleep longer than owls? Or lift heavier weights than elephants? Or run faster than hares? Or shout louder than dogs? Or wear better clothes than peacocks? Dreams move the world, Esmé. Freedom and justice, these are dreams. Romance is a dream. Loyalty and devotion to causes are dreams. The King's crown and the Cross over the altar are dreams. Our poetry, our music, our statuary, our architecture dreams. Statesmanship . . . high politics . . . high strategy . . . dreams. From Moses to Napoleon, all the great wonderful explosive men of the world, dreamers of dreams.'

He stopped, a little intoxicated by his oratory. Then he added softly :

'And woman is the bidder of dreams . . . we weave them from the gossamer of her spirit.'

Esmé said : 'Niall calls my eyes windows into heaven. His dreams have no more to do with me than a star has to do with the telescope you see it through.'

They sat silent, listening to the sound of the waves that was long-drawn, and deep, and sombre. He took her hand and kissed it, and she did not draw it away. At last he cried with a sob that made her wince :

'I love you with all my soul, and I'll never love any one else.'

She did not look at him. They went back to the Castle. She found a fat letter from Niall. When Hal had gone away she opened it. But the style was so turgid that she skipped sheet after sheet. She made up her mind grimly to endure no more. The letter ended by announcing that he was leaving London the following night, and would be home the next day. And then came the postscript :

'Wars and rumours of war in the air here. The

Irish business looks about as hopeless as can be, and I'm afraid 1914 is likely to be marked red in Irish history. And then this Balkan scrap between Austria and Servia that seems to be brewing up. But my own affairs interest me most, Esmé. Can we not try again, one more adventure? I feel that perhaps we might rediscover one another as unexpectedly as we lost one another. As I sit here looking out on the dull street I see you, your eyes, your hair . . . your wonder hair—O Esmé, let us try one more adventure, I beseech you. . . .’

That afternoon Esmé wrote to her friend :

‘The more I see of Hal the more I find him resemble Niall . . . and yet a whole world of difference separates them. Hal is so young; he hasn't got the vigour of mind that Niall has. He's more sincere than Niall, and yet I doubt his sincerity more than I doubt Niall's. . . . I don't believe I could ever get further with Hal than just devotion or kisses (lovely kisses, I admit). Niall tempts a different curiosity even in his bombast and harangues....’

‘If I could only find out how much my appearance affects both of them. I believe I almost wish I could get run over, or something, just to see how they would take it—I mean, what they would think of me, and their dreams about me, if I was deformed. What a pity one can't cut off one's head for half an hour. For I don't want . . .’

The letter stopped there abruptly, because at that point Esmé jumped out of her chair with her eyes dancing and reckless, and her mouth screwed into a smile that was nearly sardonic. She rang the bell, her maid answered it. She cried :

‘Scissors, Jean, quick.’

While the scissors were being brought Esmé stood before the mirror watching herself. Her lips were open, and she breathed quickly; excitement transformed the weariness that had been in her eyes. She looked glowing. Jean's step outside the door



caused her to wave her hand to herself, and then to kiss her hand.

When Jean had gone again she snatched up the scissors. She turned away from the glass, and shut her eyes tight. Then she pulled all the combs and pins out of her hair, letting it fall about her shoulders, down to her waist. The pins and combs rattled on the dressing-table.

She cut off her hair with long, crisp cuts ; and the scissors snapped short at the end of every one of them. She didn't open her eyes.

## CHAPTER XXIV

‘WHERE DID YOU GET THAT HAT?’

JEAN came back just when the last shearing had fallen to the ground. Jean shrieked. Esmé opened her eyes, and the hand that held the scissors fell to her side. She tried not to look a naughty girl.

‘Oh, ma’am,’ was all Jean could say. She kept on saying it. Her eyes never wavered from Esmé’s head. Esmé laughed at last, and patted her skirt to make the hair that clung to it fall to the ground. There was a ring of copper-gold round her feet, like a petticoat just discarded downwards. Esmé stepped out of the ring.

‘Well, do you like me?’

Jean was still saying, ‘Oh, ma’am,’ softly, like a prayer. She only shook her head.

‘It’s the fashion you know, bobbed hair,’ Esmé declared, ‘especially for red-headed girls. Besides . . . besides . . . I don’t know. . . . Am I so dreadfully ugly, really?’

‘No, ma’am . . . oh no.’

Esmé swung round and faced the glass. Jean heard her ‘oh’ as if a sudden pain had gripped her . . . but the end of the ‘oh’ was much softer than the beginning of it.

‘I’m not ugly,’ she defied, ‘not even yet.’

‘Oh no, ma’am.’

‘Jean, it suits me.’

‘Oh no, ma’am.’

‘It does . . . it does . . . it does . . . it does.’

She pushed her fingers up through the dreadful stubble. She laughed.

'Sweep it up, Jean,' she commanded, pointing to the hair on the floor, 'and put it there on the dressing-table, so that I can remember what I was like . . . and . . . I'll try on some of my best hats, please.'

Jean obeyed, stepping softly. She would have done the trying on of the hats herself, but Esmé snatched them out of her hands. Esmé crushed them on her head, one by one, and laughed, and pitched them away. . . . Once she nearly cried, instead of laughing, by mistake.

'They're no good . . . none of them are any good. Jean, why haven't I got some hats that fit, or something? I can't possibly go to the boat to-morrow in any of these things. . . .' She stopped suddenly, noting the alarm in Jean's face. 'Do you think I've gone mad?' she cried.

'Oh no, ma'am.'

'You do. So should I, too, if I was you. . . . But I haven't. I say, there's a little wee toque in one of the drawers, you remember, don't you—with a feather that Tourntourq said made a *motif* for my hair, or something? . . .'

Jean found the toque, and handed it to her mistress. Esmé put it on more carefully than any of the other hats. It fitted, all round her head, like a man's hat. (It was one of those things that are made to be balanced on odd angles of hair like a butterfly on a cabbage leaf.) Esmé looked a drummer-boy gone to the bad.

She said 'Splendid!' in gasps.

Jean began the 'oh ma'ams' again, but was told sharply to stop them. The effort it cost her to stop could be felt, because the drummer-boy effect rather got you . . . somewhere just below the belt. Esmé got up from her chair and pulled the toque off, as an errand-boy pulls off his cap. She flung it away, too.



‘I’m going to bed,’ she declared suddenly, ‘till to-morrow.’

She didn’t sleep, partly because her short hair hurt her head. But mostly because now that the thing was done she was able to weigh all the arguments against doing it. The arguments against doing it were conclusive. No woman in the world is entitled to disfigure herself, especially to entrap a man. It would serve her right if Niall, and Hal too, refused to have anything to do with her. . . . She thought suddenly how she would feel if Niall arrived with his face blackened, or something like that. . . . But no, she wouldn’t mind. She wouldn’t. She knew she wouldn’t. Would Niall mind? But of course he would. She said out loud in the darkness of her bedroom: ‘Of course Niall will mind.’

She began to excuse him to herself.

She moved restlessly in bed: the bed was hot and uncomfortable. She became thirsty, and thought of the syphon that was just beyond her reach with increasing desire. At last she flung away the bed-clothes and jumped out of bed. She switched up the lights.

That was the first time she really understood what she had done. She watched herself in fascination. She watched herself a long time without moving. Then she switched out the lights again. She ran to the bed, stumbling in the darkness. She flung herself down on the bed with her face buried in the pillow. She sobbed and sobbed. . . .

## CHAPTER XXV

### ONE MORE ADVENTURE

THE difference between one day and the next is often the difference between the reason for and the reason against. Morning sympathises so little with night's enterprise ; morning is a grown-up person, ageing a little, testy, practical, commonsense . . . with the beginnings of cowardice which grown men call sanity and caution. It is a dreadful thing, if one is impulsive, to fall into the hands of morning when tasks set overnight have not yet been completed.

Esmé woke, and found Morning seated upon her bed. She hid herself from him, reaching out for her dreams again, but her dreams fled away in fear. So she must hear Morning's voice whether she would or no.

Morning's voice was saying that to break one's sword is not the best way of winning a battle. The answer to that was that she didn't want to win any battle at all, but only to get at the truth of Niall's feelings. And she gave the answer hotly with her eyes shining. Morning said :

'That is not true, because you cried overnight when you saw what you had done with yourself. If you did not care about winning your battle, you would not have cried.'

This was difficult to answer, and so she shifted her ground a little and declared that she would not win with such weapons as hair and eyes and lips . . . 'things.' But the declaration was not satisfying somehow ; for, after all, one was oneself. Without hair and eyes and lips how could one win anything ?

That idea frightened her, because it was the broken sword idea. A sense of weakness came, even a sense of humiliation. Supposing that she had lost her power over Niall now that she had disfigured her good looks? She had meant to fight for her soul, and she had betrayed herself before the battle opened.

She jumped out of bed, and dressed without looking at the glass. She dared not look at the glass. Her hair still lay on the dressing-table, but she held herself away from it as a man holds himself away from lost honours. Horrid little imps began to whisper in her mind that Niall would despise her, reject her, be free of her. Niall would not even suffer now from her vagaries; he would only suffer if she came near him, if she showed any affection for him. The reality of sex attraction rose like a hag before her eyes. She had defied the gods. It was this way a woman felt when she began to lose her looks, and saw her husband cast eyes at younger women. That was the explanation of paint and powder and wigs . . . the things the world of youth derided so mercilessly; the things that were really so bitterly tragic.

Then anger came; the raging anger of captives who cannot break their bars. Niall should not see her like this. She would hide away from him . . . away . . . anywhere, so that he might not discover her secret and ruin her with his pity or his contempt. She clenched her fists, extending her arms. He should not . . . he should not. She would die before she gave him this opportunity.

She flung herself down on the bed again, but was up in an instant, because the softness of the bed fanned her anger. There was no more softness left in the world. The world was just a market, no more. A market to buy things in . . . women, beauty, pleasure. The wise ones sold themselves dear, making the most of their desirable qualities . . .



always making the most and always demanding the most. Giving little for much. . . .

Niall would be angry that she had disfigured his property, just as he was angry when she broke the glass over his father's picture.

She glanced at her watch. It was nearly ten o'clock. The boat arrived at twelve. That meant that in an hour and a half she would have to go and meet Niall. And if she didn't go, he would come to her . . . to his property that she had cut about and spoiled. . . .

She cried aloud. Already almost she could see his eyes disparaging her, condemning her. She could feel his contempt. . . . He would stand there in the doorway with his eyes cold. He would speak.

She ran to the bell and rang it viciously. Jean came. She cried :

'Order the car at once, will you ? I want a letter taken across to Mr. Newlands . . . and bring me some notepaper.'

Jean said :

'Mr. Newlands has just called, ma'am. He's in the garden, waiting to see you.'

Esmé exploded. 'Why did you not tell me ? How long has he been here ? How ridiculous of you not to tell me at once.'

'Mr. Newlands has just come, ma'am. I was coming to tell you when you rang.'

'Ask him to come in and wait in the drawing-room.'

Esmé finished dressing, and went down without allowing a single thought to stay in her mind. She burst into the room to prevent herself from turning back on the threshold. She rushed to Hal, and her eyes dared him.

He was sitting on the sofa with a picture paper on his lap. He looked up . . . he went on looking. His mouth opened. It went on opening.

And then he began to laugh.

'Oh you kid . . . you silly kid !'

He stuffed a cushion into his face. His face smiled and grinned all round the cushion. Esmé stood watching him, with big tears coming in her eyes . . . her poor hair straggled and reeled on her head.

‘Don’t . . . oh don’t, please,’ she begged.

‘My dear child, I must.’ He lowered the cushion and breathed deep. ‘Niall coming to-day?’ he asked sharply.

‘Yes.’

‘Hm!’

She broke out again. ‘Hal, listen; I can’t meet Niall. He mustn’t see me like this. He must never see me like this. Never. Do you understand? So you’ve got to help me, to hide me, somewhere.’ She added, after a moment: ‘I did it to see if it was just my hair and things he cared about . . . and now I daren’t.’

Suddenly she knelt on the floor and grasped his knees.

‘Oh, you will.’

He said: ‘If I could only take you away for all the time.’

She leaned her head on his knees. She wept. It was the first relief she had known since she did the deed. She cried:

‘How kind you are! Oh, Hal, you will take me away?’

‘Of course I will.’ He asked suddenly: ‘Why do you mind so much his seeing you, and not my seeing you?’

‘I . . . I don’t know, Hal.’ She added: ‘I could go to Mrs. Gregor M’Gregor’s . . . but, no, I don’t want that. I think . . . I think I’ll go to Torquay to mother. Will you drive me to Glasgow, because, of course, I daren’t go by the boat he’s coming in?’

‘Glasgow is eighty miles away.’

‘Dalglish will lend you his car. I know he will.’

‘Oh, the car’s all right.’

He got up and walked across the room, and then back again. He seemed rather miserable in his excitement. Esmé watched him: she was still kneeling by the sofa, with her head on her hands.

‘All right,’ he declared. ‘I’ll go for the car now. I’ll be back in an hour.’

When he had gone, Esmé went back to her room. She packed a few things hastily in a valise . . . brushes and combs and things, because she couldn’t remember what she wanted, and what she didn’t want. She would get to Torquay the next night, and her mother would have everything. Besides, it was the end of July. People would be travelling away from town. Her hair on the dressing-table still leered and blinked at her. She put out her hand to sweep it away, and then didn’t. She found a sheet of paper, and wrote to Niall:

‘I am going to mother at Torquay till it grows again. Hal Newlands is running me up to Glasgow.’

She signed the letter ‘Esmé,’ and dated it Wednesday. She put the letter on the top of her hair. After a moment she snatched the paper away, and wrote at the bottom of it:

‘You wanted us to have one more adventure. But I’m such a miserable coward.’

✠ A motoring cap and a heavy veil gave her back a little of her courage.



## CHAPTER XXVI

### RIGHT ABOUT FACE

THEY travelled by Inveraray. At Inveraray there was a handbill of the *Glasgow Herald* outside a shop, which announced in large type :

‘AUSTRIA DECLARES WAR ON SERVIA.

GERMANY MOBILISING.

FRANCE AND RUSSIA . . .’

Esmé gripped Hal’s arm.

‘What does it mean?’ she cried. ‘I didn’t know there was anything wrong. I haven’t seen a paper for days and days.’

‘Neither have I,’ said Hal laconically. ‘I never read ’em. Probably one of those Balkan rows, or something.’

He slowed the car down as they came to the hotel beside the castle.

‘Let’s have lunch, anyhow,’ he suggested cheerfully.

The hotel dining-room was empty. He showed her the famous verse scratched by Burns on one of the windows . . . the verse about ‘the Lord their God, His Grace . . .’ and made her laugh by saying that she would have found a sympathiser in Burns ‘who didn’t care a snap of his fingers for MacCallien More, or anybody else.’

But her laughter was uneasy and short. Because the newspaper handbill was still worrying across her mind. She asked suddenly :

'If there was a war, Hal, would everybody be called up . . . I mean, all soldiers?'

'Oh yes, rather.'

She hesitated a moment.

'And people who had been soldiers?'

'Yes, of course. That's the idea of the Reserve.'

A big man came into the room just then . . . an oldish man, dressed in kilts, who looked like somebody. Both Esmé and Hal noticed how worried he seemed. He sat down at one of the tables, and took a newspaper out of his pocket. But he soon pushed the newspaper away. Evidently he had read most of it already. At last he said to Hal:

'Frightfully serious news, don't you think?' in a strained voice.

'I haven't seen the news, sir,' Hal told him. . . .

'Do you mean about the Balkan show? I saw . . .'

The big man jumped.

'Balkan show! Good God!—I beg your wife's pardon. Why, man, Russia is mobilising, Germany's mobilising, France is mobilising, to-morrow we shall be mobilising. . . . It's . . . it's Armageddon.'

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun. He was so excited that he didn't see the look in Esmé's eyes when he called her Hal's wife. Esmé drew a sharp little breath and asked:

'What is Armageddon? I don't understand.'

'The war of the worlds. Perhaps the end of our world. The Navy's put to sea, I hear. Please God . . .'

He stopped again.

Luncheon was served, and the conversation was not resumed.

Hal said in low tones: 'If it's true, I guess I'll get hauled back to "the shop" double quick. . . . I say, old girl, what a bit of luck!'

'Don't, Hal. . . .'

Esmé had lost even the pretence of mirth that had

made this journey up Loch Fyne a kind of perambulator parade. She scarcely spoke a word until they were in the car again. And not even the wonders of the upper loch under a clear sky seemed to rouse her interest, though Hal kept pointing things out to her all the time. In the glen above Cairndow he stopped the car a moment to let the engine cool after the precipitous climb up from the shore. Esmé got out and walked a little way along the road alone. She looked up at the hills that shut this place in like a fortress. There was trailing mist on the tops of the hills. The sadness of the place caught her and held her. Nameless fears seemed to dwell among those hills. . . . But it had not been so in her first adventuring with Niall. . . . How far away all that seemed now; how unreal, too, like a dream. She shut out the thought of Niall, because the thought hurt her unbearably.

The car overtook her, and they continued their journey. On the top of 'Rest-and-be-thankful,' where the great spaces of Glen Crow opened at her feet with the sudden swiftness of Highland scenery, she caught her breath: an impulse not to go down into this valley came to her; for this, Niall had told her, was the barrier-wall of Argyll. . . . Beyond the barrier was a world not his.

And that thought stayed with her all the miles to Arrochar, and until they came to another newspaper headbill . . . an evening paper this time, because Arrochar has a railway connection with Glasgow. The new headbill ran:

'WAR CLOUD. SITUATION GROWS GRAVER.  
FIRST SHOTS EXCHANGED.'

Hal cried: 'My God! I believe that chap at Inveraray was right.'

He glanced at Esmé. Esmé was as pale as paper.



He cursed himself for a thoughtless brute. And then Esmé dropped her bombshell. She said :

‘ Hal, I want you to turn the car and take me back . . . now.’

‘ What ! Good Heavens, kid ! . . .’

‘ Please, Hal . . . oh, please . . .’

She gripped his arm. Her eyes were almost desperate. She repeated ‘ Oh, please,’ like a child asking forgiveness for a big fault. He stopped the car.

‘ But we won’t get back till late : probably after dark,’ he said.

‘ I don’t care. So long as we get back to-night, before . . . before the steamer sails to-morrow.’

‘ Before the steamer sails ?’

She made a quick gesture of repudiation. ‘ Hal, it’s Niall I’m thinking of. . . . He was a soldier, you know, and they will call him up . . . to-morrow . . . to-day, perhaps. . . .’

‘ But we were running away from Niall.’

‘ Please, Hal . . . please.’

Hal’s eyes were troubled. He shook his head. He didn’t understand, and yet understanding was knocking at the doors of his mind. Perhaps he didn’t want to understand.

‘ But your hair . . .’ he suggested dismally, as one speaks when hope is dead and buried.

‘ What does that matter ?’ Again she caught his arm. ‘ Don’t you understand, Hal ? Oh, don’t you understand ?’

Hal turned the car.

## CHAPTER XXVII

‘GOOD-BYE, DOLLY, I MUST LEAVE YOU’

SOMETHING went wrong with something just outside Cairndow, and that meant two hours spent on the road. So it was ten o'clock before they were able to start again. And that meant that it was midnight before they got to Tourntourq.

Hal had scarcely spoken during the journey, and Esmé had scarcely spoken, except to cry out once when they ran over a baby rabbit, because now they seemed to have gone far, far away from one another, just when they had been coming near. Perhaps, too, the fear that was over all the world had got communicated to them . . . the fear that was like the boggy man come true all of a sudden in the middle of the nursery.

Tourntourq Castle was quite dark when they came to it, and the big oak door looked as if it couldn't be opened. In fact, the whole house had a 'couldn't-be-opened' look that chilled both of them. It seemed almost a blasphemous thing to try to make it be opened.

Nevertheless Hal tried. He rang the big clanging bell, and he thumped the big knocker. They heard the bell like laughter deep inside of a huge man . . . nasty, discordant laughter . . . then they heard a window going up, and Niall's voice :

‘Who's there?’

‘Esmé,’ said Esmé humbly.

The window shut. Then, after a little, bolts began to get pulled back behind the door. The door

opened, and showed Niall in his dressing-gown. Esmé exclaimed :

‘ I had to come back, Niall . . . when I saw about the war.’

Her voice was shaky. She added : ‘ Hal has been an angel, taking me, and then bringing me back again.’

Niall held the door open a little wider. The glare of Hal’s headlights prevented her from seeing his face. But she knew what his face was like without seeing it. She cried :

‘ Good-night, Hal . . . and thanks ever so much,’ and walked into the house, past Niall, with her heart thumping hard against her ribs.

She heard Niall shut the door and bolt it, bolt by bolt, and then she heard the car start up and go away. She ran upstairs to her bedroom, and switched on the light. Her letter had gone, but her hair was still on the table. She came back out of the room to meet Niall. She called his name softly as he mounted the stair towards her. There was fear and deep contrition in her voice.

Niall came to the top of the stair, and Niall would have passed her. . . . She cried his name again, out loud, and flung her arms round his neck. She pleaded :

‘ Oh, say it isn’t true . . . that you won’t have to go . . . that they won’t take you.’

She clung to him.

Niall said : ‘ Hadn’t we better make an end of this humbug ?’

He would have left her, only her determination held him in spite of his anger. It even brought him into her bedroom and into the light. She struck her motor cap and veil away from her face, and showed him all her folly. She cried :

‘ Now you know why I ran away. I thought I couldn’t bear you to see. But that was this morning, before . . . before the other thing came.’



She watched his face as she spoke. There was no sign of shrinking from her in his face. Only cold, hard anger against her that was like the blade of a sharp sword. He said :

'I suppose you understand that all Tourntourq knows of your elopement with that fellow . . . and this other idiocy. . . .'

'Niall . . . don't !'

He shrugged his shoulders ; she relinquished her hold of him, and stood a little away from him.

'Of course you can do what you like with your personal appearance,' he added, very bitterly.

They faced one another. She saw that he was trembling. A terrible fear stole into her heart, a fear worse than the fear of losing him that had hounded her back across all those miles.

'Niall,' she whispered, 'you don't mean . . .'

She stopped there, afraid of her own words. He said :

'You wouldn't be the first woman to . . . to . . .' He shrugged his shoulders. He added : 'I suppose husbands who leave their wives do so at their own risk. Is it not so ?'

'Niall !'

'After all, you warned me often enough—that time he came into your bedroom . . . and the poetry, and . . .'

Esmé stopped him. She flung herself at him again. Again she wrapped her arms about his neck. Her eyes pleaded, but her voice was nearly as commanding as his voice : 'You shall not . . . you shall not,' she cried. 'I won't let you ; oh, never, never. . . . Niall, say you *know* it isn't true . . . that it couldn't be true.'

For a moment, looking into his eyes, she thought that he wavered. She redoubled her repudiation then. But his cold smile broke through that gentler moment. He said :

‘I *know* that you have made me the laughing-stock of all my people . . . so that I thank God I rejoin my regiment to-morrow.’

‘Oh!’

She wilted under this lash. But she still clung to him. . . .

‘Forgive me, Niall; you must, because there is only that to forgive. I swear there is only that to forgive.’

He disengaged himself from her arms, and stood away from her. Every moment that passed now hardened his resolve against her. She saw that his resolve against her was unshakable on its foundation of his suspicion and his outraged pride, especially his outraged pride. She flung herself on the bed, moaning in her dismay. She heard him say that he would arrange with his solicitors about the future; and other things which burned her heart to listen to, among them that he did not wish her to write to him. He added:

‘And I shall not write. If anything happens to me, you will be told about it by the firm. I think you may go on living here if you wish to . . . for the present.’

Esmé was very, very tired. Her nerves were all jangled to bits. Fears like carrion crows swooped upon her mind. This final cruelty broke the last bonds of her restraint. Suddenly, her mind and all her nerves seemed to burst into fire. She sprang up from the bed, and stood quivering with passionate rage before him. She flung his insults in his teeth, one by one, with all the bitterness of her spirit. His distrust of her: his injured pride: his charity that would keep a roof still above her dishonoured head. . . .

It was a horrible performance, and its ending was not less horrible than its beginning. She cried:

‘And so that is the dream’s end . . . the death dance of all the elves and fairies . . . eh, Tourntourq? Where is your dream girl, Tourntourq? Who

was to be a window into Heaven for you, and a telescope, and what not? Where has she gone to, can you tell me? And her hair that was like altar fires . . . where is it? Ha!’

She sprang to the dressing-table. She filled her two fists with the coils of her hair that lay there gleaming in subtle mockery. She rushed at him. She flung the golden shower about his face and his breast.

Long wisps of hair clung to his coat, and then, borne downwards by their own weight, fell softly to the carpet at his feet. She cried:

‘Take it . . . take it, Tourntourq. It belongs to you . . . the altar fires, you know . . . the altar fires.’

She sank back on the bed. He shivered. He went away to his room.

An owl was hooting miserably among the cliffs.





**BOOK III**





## CHAPTER I

### THE BED-BUGS ARRIVE

The golden bug has wings of fire,  
And spreads them like a flame;  
The bed-bug has no wings at all,  
But it gets there just the same.'

'AND that is the difference between our fellows and the French . . . we both get there . . . by different means. And that is life, too, Esmé, as I'm beginning to see it. I say, look out for the bed-bugs . . . they aren't pretty, "but they get there all the same." You and I never really did justice to the bed-bug bit of us, did we?'

Esmé put Hal's letter down and laughed, her first laugh since she had come to Hampstead. After a little while she went on reading again.

'You see dreams—that's the golden bugs—are all right, but they take care of themselves. Everybody sees 'em, and loves 'em, and so on. And the bed-bugs are climbing uphill all the time, in the dark, foot over foot, *getting there* just the same. (That was the Ypres show, really, when they had the cooks in the line.) You don't discover the bed-bugs till they arrive.

'Esmé, my bed-bugs are arriving (bother that candle), and I'm seeing things. To change the metaphor, I've been having some heart-to-heart talks with Jack North, who, as I told you in my last, is a Captain in our show, and who comes from . . . Clapham. (Happy result of a year of war.)

'Never mind just who Jack N. is. He is. And he's married and has three children. Last night he told me about his marriage. But I'll describe him to you first. "Picture to yourself, dear lady" . . . one of those old-

fashioned "gasogene" machines (Dalglish has one on his sideboard) that have a little bulb above and a big bulb below . . . add legs and arms *et voila!* It would be such an enormous head if it wasn't for such an enormous understanding . . . and he has red hair of the "going-going-gone" kind, and a squint. . . . And a woman loves him. . . . And he has three kids, who also all love him. . . . Puzzle, find the dream?

'But I've found it . . . coming uphill, foot over foot, getting there just the same, in fact. And here it is: Jack N. scrapped a big career to marry Mrs. Jack N. and live in the suburbs, and have "scrag of mutton in lodgings," as Major Pendennis said. No use boring you with details; it's a fact.

*'And Mrs. Jack N. doesn't know, and never will know.*

'He lives in the suburbs—you see, you don't get off paying for these little luxuries—and has scrag of mutton, and his kids make a beastly row when he wants to work, and his work isn't the big things he could have done, and Mrs. Jack N. is like other people, and there's no "Made in Heaven" trade-mark on it. But . . . (He didn't tell me all this, mind you, I guessed it; and I believe my guesses more than anybody's tellings.)

'Esmé, my dear old duck, you can't explain it. No more can I. No more can he. It's just the bed-bugs getting there, that's all. And between you and me, I don't believe they ever do go away again once they get there. You see, *they haven't any wings*. (You remember that old thing of mine:

Wings, but I cannot fly,  
Nor for the wings I bear,  
May walk nor run i' the sun.  
Oh Thou most High,  
Who gave me wings,  
Wherefore didst flight deny?

That's golden bug stuff—hence the expression "hum-bug.") Really, though, happiness consists in being happy. And that fetches me to the moral of my tale. Guess it?

. . . . .

'Your last letter has just come—since I wrote above. I nearly tore up all the stuff after I read it, but didn't.

You 'll understand. Poor kid, I think the way that man has treated you is absolutely vile—so there. In fact, I feel so wrong about it that I'm sick. . . . Kid, kid, if only there was scrag of mutton for you and me in the world. . . . I say *to the deuce with dreams.*'

After that letter Esmé didn't hear from Hal for three weeks. There was a push on, or something, and she scarcely expected to. Her work at the hospital kept her busy. Then this came :

'Scrap . . . scrap . . . scrap ! But I 'm here all right still. So is *he*. I heard only yesterday. And I heard, too, that he's done well, something tremendous ; V.C. in the offing. Oh, he's a man, old Niall, but . . . but . . . but . . . Esmé, Jack N. was killed last night, shot through the head by a sniper. Never moved. . . . Dare I ask you to go and see Mrs. Jack (10 The Birdcage Walk, Clapham) and tell her ? Don't if you can't. . . . I'll understand. I don't believe I could.'



## CHAPTER II

### THE PITY OF IT

DULCIE read Niall's letter, as she read all his letters, in her bedroom, hidden away so that nobody could disturb her enjoyment of it. She read it furtively, as if she feared that her enjoyment of it was bound to be disturbed. Niall wrote :

' MY DEAR DULCIE,—It's nearly a year now since this adventure opened. I have eaten and drunk : I am not yet full. The music lifts up my soul ; the mystery and majesty of it all soothe me.

' But I have found that even these things are not enough. I have torn all the tissue of this greatest of dreams to tatters, and I have not found reality . . . the substance of dreams.

' Do you say that your efforts have failed ? Is it blank, this horizon of my hopes ? She does not answer : she does not speak : she gives no sign. Oh, if I had the courage to go to her and see her.

' This is the strangest thing to me of all—that I lack the courage to go to her. I cannot find in my heart any reason, because there can be no reason. A year ago I should have gone to her ; a year ago I should have humbled my pride and tried issues with fate. . . . Something has happened to me. I am afraid. I daren't try. Because if I tried and failed the world would hold nothing more.

' You cannot understand me : I can scarcely understand myself. Every day I screw up my courage to the resolve that I will write, or ask leave and go. And every day courage, screwed up, ebbs away from me. The chance is too great, too hazardous. I have played too recklessly with the wonder which the gods gave me. I

fear their vengeance. Yes, that is it. I know that there must be vengeance for what I have done, for the pain I have inflicted, for the sweet kindness that I have spurned. . . . I can see her yet as she stood on that last day, with the handfuls of her hair falling from loose fingers on the carpet . . . her eyes . . .’

‘You say she is still at Hampstead, at the hospital. Is she quite well? Has she everything that she needs, that she wants? Is she as wonderful and splendid as ever? But I care for that less now. My dream girl seems to have become a spirit, a reality. Fool, I thought that I could see heaven through her eyes: but her eyes were windows only to her own soul.

‘It is of her soul that I am afraid.

‘Do you know what it feels like to go into a beautiful room full of well-dressed people when you are all muddy and hot and tired? That is only a faint shadow of what I feel like when I think of coming to her. I am in rags, filthy . . . how can I touch that sweetness?

‘And I have other moods, black moods of distrust and doubt. That boy Hal, with his clear eyes . . . what a sweet claim he must make upon every woman’s heart! Isn’t he like one of the well-dressed in the drawing-room? This is torment, refined, strained. In these moods I could strangle her as Othello strangled Desdemona:

But, oh, the pity of it, Iago,  
Iago, the pity of it, Iago!

‘I don’t boast; but that mood brought me a V.C. the other day, or, at least, the offer of it. I have refused, though. I will not be decorated for the strangling of Desdemona. (How little these gasping Germans knew that they died vicariously at my hands!) I pray God day and night that He will take this horror of jealousy away from me. . . .

‘So you see I must still rely on you. Write to her often; tell her a little. If there be only so little of a break in the clouds that a gleam of light shines through, delay nothing to tell me. Then it would be different. . . .

‘I hope you are well, and that your father enjoys his work in London.—Your friend,  
NIALl.’

Dulcie folded the letter when she had finished it. Her movements were deliberate—almost stealthy. If she had deceived him, at least the punishment she had inflicted was nothing to the punishment she bore. She repeated to herself in bitter tones : ‘ I hope you are well . . . ’ She laughed out loud in her empty room. . . . When her laughter died away though, fears crept into her eyes, and forms of shame . . . quick loathings of herself, like slimy creatures felt with revulsion. She looked at herself in the glass, and saw how pale she was ; her light prettiness seemed to have faded, revealing base purposes she had not dreamed of. . . . She thought of Niall, with his eyes weary and straining after this red-headed girl of his ; and of Esmé, sick and broken for Niall. . . . It was horrible . . . horrible. Then she laughed again. The taste of their suffering was sweet in her mouth.

But what after ? Some day he must come and find out her unfaith. . . . She grew pale in the thought. She knelt and tried to pray that she might die before that day came . . . that she might die soon because life was so bitter and so worthless a thing.

Her prayers, unwinged, died upon her lips.



## CHAPTER III

‘ ANY LETTERS FOR ME ? ’

ESMÉ drove to Clapham through streets full of golden sunlight, London streets charged with the magic of the years that have been, and the years that come so steadily out of London’s distances. The wonder of the new worlds that these hours were summoning thrilled her ; the golden sunlight in the streets seemed to belong by some alchemy to the sunlight of the New Heaven and the New Earth ; the sweep of Regent Street, with its low roofs and its ripe blending of colour, stirred memories without really awakening them. London was like a dream that now in these grim days had begun to come true. Its bigness was not of numbers only, but of head and heart—most of all of heart.

The bigness of London made her sorrow more bearable, though not less real ; she thought it would do that for all the women within its bounds who had lost their dreams, or seen their dreams shattered and dissipated.

The cab ran down Whitehall, and she remembered a day she had come here with her mother before she went to stay with the Deerings at Tourntourq. Her mother had complained that the noise of the traffic gave her a dreadful headache. There was not so much noise to-day—fewer ’buses, fewer cabs . . . but there were the Horseguards. She turned to look at the Horseguards . . . she saw the aerial over the Admiralty which controls the British Navy. . . . What a little thing her sorrow was !

And yet not little, for in some way her dream belonged to all dreams, as a cog belongs to a wheel. That was the meaning of this great London, and this struggle of peoples that was so near and intimate in these war-time streets. At Tournourq it might appear that a dream more or less did not matter; in London one knew better than that. In London dream and reality seemed to be jostling one another all day. If nothing mattered, at least everything counted.

She thought of Hal then, and the change of outlook his letters showed. Hal wrote 'to the deuce with dreams,' after he had written that the bed-bugs were arriving. That meant, perhaps, that Hal was growing up into a man, losing his sentimentality. She remembered she had suspected that Hal's sentimentality was the fountain out of which his dreams flowed. . . .

It was different with Niall. . . .

They crossed Westminster Bridge into seas of mean streets . . . some of them mean streets become well-to-do. She lost interest then in this grosser body of her London. Was it really true that Niall had won the V.C.? The cab stopped at a small red-brick house, one of the innumerable bird-cages that are arranged, row upon row, around London, houses that seem to have been produced by the three-colour process at enormous speed. She told the cabman to wait, and rang the bell. A servant opened the door. She was taken into the drawing-room. Her courage nearly failed her. . . . The drawing-room was just a curtain or two flung round photographs of a man in uniform. It was a woman saying in knick-knacks and things, and as well as her purse would let her, that all that she had to give was given.

The door opened. A tall, fair-haired girl came into the room. Esmé saw that she had brave eyes; then she saw the mourning that was so very new. Esmé

told her story in broken words. At the end she put her arm round the girl. The girl said :

‘ I mustn’t cry. Jack always said I mustn’t.’

She didn’t cry any more. She asked Esmé :

‘ It was your husband who was Jack’s friend ? ’

‘ Oh no. A boy I know.’

‘ I ’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.’

‘ M’Callien, Mrs. M’Callien.’

‘ Why,’ the girl started, ‘ not . . . I mean it isn’t your husband whose V.C.’s in this afternoon’s papers ? Colonel M’Callien of Tourn . . . I forget . . . such a queer name . . . the bravest deed of . . . what ’s wrong ? ’

Esmé had risen ; she was pale. Her lips trembled. She glanced round the little room like a thirsty man looking for water.

‘ Yes,’ she said.

The girl put out a hand to stay her.

‘ You haven’t seen a paper ? I know what a shock I must have given you. I ’m so sorry. Please let me be the first to congratulate you.’

‘ Oh, it ’s quite all right . . . really.’

Esmé shook the girl’s hand. She moved to the door. She didn’t look at the girl’s eyes. She said ‘ Good-bye,’ and drove away without waiting a moment. At Westminster she bought a bunch of papers. The first one she opened announced :

‘ THE BRAVEST DEED OF THE WAR

SCOTTISH COLONEL’S V.C.

TWENTY HUNS ACCOUNTED FOR.

MACHINE-GUN CAPTURED SINGLE-HANDED.’

There was nearly half a column of it, and then a history of Niall’s family. At the very end it was



stated : ' Last year Colonel M'Callien married Miss Esmé Hillier, daughter of Lieutenant-Colonel Hillier of the Indian Army.' Another paper gave an account of the marriage ' in romantic circumstances ' that made Esmé blush . . . it was so inaccurate. And then there was an article about Niall's ' second sight ' by ' an old friend ' that was even more dreadful than the marriage story. She wondered where the newspapers had got hold of all these lies and half-truths.

She drove back to her flat in Heath Mansions, and lay down on her bed. Her maid brought her some tea. She read all the newspaper stuff again and again. . . .

At last she fell asleep. She dreamed that Hal and Niall were both with her, and they were friends now with their differences healed. She was happy beyond all her expectation in that reunion. But then Niall seemed to fade away, and only Hal was left. She bent her eyes to look at Hal, because he did not answer her when she spoke to him . . . she saw that he was dead.

She woke with a cry of terror. . . . The room was quite dark. She jumped out of bed and switched on the lights. What time was it ? She rang for Jean to tell her the time.

It was after eight. She asked : ' Has the post come yet ? '

' Yes, ma'am.'

' Any letters for me ? '

' Yes, ma'am, one.'

Jean brought the letter. It was from Mrs. Vericker to congratulate her on Niall's V.C.

' Dulcie Lacourt has just been telling me about it,' it ran ; ' she hears from Niall now and again, you know. It seems he tried to refuse it, but they insisted . . . the most wonderful . . . '

The letter fell on to the carpet. Esmé's head sunk on her breast. Her hair, now grown again, and

splendid as of old, gleamed in the light. Suddenly the bell rang. She heard the door being opened, and then a man's voice. She jumped up. . . .

'Hal!'

She went to meet him.

## CHAPTER IV

‘ OH ! YOUNG LOCHINVAR HAS COME OUT OF  
THE WEST ’

HAL was booted and spurred, and the mud of the trenches clung to him. He looked bigger, too, because his jacket was all bulged with things, and he had heaps of other things slung on to every part of him. He seemed to fill the little hall of the flat quite full. . . . The light fell on his face as Esmé came to him. It was an older face.

That was the first swift impression. The next discounted the idea that the boy looked older, substituting merely different. Something had happened, that was all. . . . Perhaps, Esmé thought, men looked like that who had seen death without first seeing life.

Hal's joy of his return struggled in his face with sorrow that he didn't even try to hide. He cried out the moment he and Esmé were alone in the drawing-room :

‘ O Esmé . . . Dalgleish is killed. ’

There was wonder, a kind of awe, in his voice, as if this thing had happened against the will of God, and must not be spoken about.

Esmé cried out too against it, because she would not believe that Dalgleish was killed. They found one another like children afraid in a thunderstorm. . . . Then tears came in Esmé's eyes. Hal said :

‘ I was with him behind the lines when he died. He knew I was somewhere near, and they found me. He gave me a letter for Olive. He made me promise



to give it to her myself . . . and I managed to get leave. . . .’

He sat down on the sofa, and covered his face with his hands. He was very tired. Esmé came, and put her arm round him. They were silent a long time. At last he said :

‘ I saw an evening paper as I came up. . . . He ’s got it.’

‘ Yes, Hal.’

‘ What does it all matter, anyhow ?’

‘ I don’t know, Hal.’

He looked up in her face. His eyes were strange and full of pain. . . .

‘ My God !’ he whispered, ‘ it ’s horrible . . . you here all alone, and this fuss about him . . . and Dalglish . . .’

He stopped because she was crying. He bent and kissed her hair. He thought that in her uniform she looked more lovely, more forsaken . . . as if she was marked out as an exile from her proper life. Suddenly, as if some power outside himself had mastered him altogether, he flung his arms round her. He cried out miserably the thing that would have a voice. . . . Esmé forced herself and went away from him.

‘ No, Hal,’ she said. ‘ Please no !’

He flushed suddenly and hotly.

‘ Why not ? And why keep up this farce any longer ? Because it is a farce. He doesn’t care. If he cared, would he stay away and treat you as he does treat you ? My God, if you were in the gutter I’d find you there and be in the gutter too with you.’

‘ Please, please, Hal.’

‘ No . . . that time is all gone now. Can’t you see that nothing matters nowadays except . . . except you ? What is there to live for anyway ? Everything is gone . . . gone. . . .’

He spread out his arms. His eyes sought her.

She thought that his eyes were very honest. A sudden weakness, the slackening of her resolve, overcame her. Only then she realised how constant and fierce this battle was which she was fighting with herself, how great a toll it was taking of her strength. He offered rest and release. . . .

‘I . . . I can’t let you talk to me like that, Hal,’ she pleaded. ‘If you only knew how difficult . . .’ she added, after a moment. ‘Perhaps it is my fault. I should have seen that he was not like the others.’

Hal sat up with an exclamation of impatience.

‘Not like the others! What has that got to do with it? Are you not of more value than a lot of dreams? Will you always live in rivalry to his father and his gods? If love means anything, surely it means passion. . . . His wife will have to live on parade. Dulcie Lacourt was the girl he ought to have married. Dulcie would have lived on parade . . . loved it too.’

Esmé said, after a moment :

‘I believe Dulcie was the girl he ought to have married. It was my coming that spoiled all that.’

She stood looking straight in front of her, into the past perhaps, or the future. Her face was very wistful. But Hal saw a dim light in her eyes, like the light that had been in them on the night of the Deering dinner party, after she had come back with Mrs. Vericker. He thought that her recklessness was coming to her again.

‘Have you heard anything from him since this V.C. business?’ he asked brutally.

‘No, Hal.’

He shrugged his shoulders. Was there any need to continue the discussion? Even the pain and hurt in Esmé’s face did not mitigate the judgment he passed upon her. Knowledge of the cruelty of his youth made her almost hate him for an instant. But the feeling passed cloud-like, in the stab of Mrs.

Vericker’s letter, with its chastisement of hope and pride. She hated Mrs. Vericker in her soul.

‘ Niall writes to Dulcie,’ she confessed in level tones, anxious that he should know this thing from her own lips.

‘ Yes, Olive told me that.’

Esmé sat down : her tears betrayed her. She gave up struggling, and cried hopelessly then ; and her grief, unbound, gathered strength. She sobbed so that her whole body shook—a poor broken little thing, he thought, with his cheeks flaming, and his fists clenched. He came beside her, and put his arm round her waist.

‘ Don’t,’ he begged, ‘ it doesn’t do any good. You are so much better when you fight . . . so much stronger.’

‘ I can’t fight any more.’

‘ Then let me . . . for you.’

She waved him away, and recovered herself.

‘ No.’

He stood in front of the fire with his head up, gazing at the opposite wall on which hung a picture of Omdurman, a part of the hired furnishing. On a little table below the picture was Niall’s photograph in a big silver frame . . . an old photograph taken long before his marriage.

‘ Listen,’ he said, ‘ I ’m going up to Tourntourq to-night to see Olive and deliver my letter. A week from to-day I ’m coming back again. I shall have three days in town. Will you think it over till then ? ’ He added deliberately, ‘ It will open the way for him to Dulcie if you decide to . . . to get out.’

Next minute he had gone, and she was left alone.



## CHAPTER V

### BUTCHER'S BOY

NEXT morning at the hospital, everybody congratulated Esmé on Niall's V.C. She had to answer a fire of questions about her feelings on the subject, about her pride in Niall, about 'her romantic marriage,' about his second sight, and about her desire to see him back safe and sound, and so on. The ordeal almost killed her ; but somehow or other she managed to answer all the questions without crying, and say all the right things without arousing more suspicion than her loneliness and evident unhappiness had aroused long ago. It was generally decided that she was a 'miserable little thing,' who didn't deserve to have a husband at all, and who certainly didn't deserve to have a hero for a husband. Nobody could imagine what a man like that saw in her.

Esmé was a V.A.D., and within limits she did what she chose, because she was not paid anything for her services. The wards she worked in were under a Sister of fat and benevolent ways who interfered with nothing . . . But the Medical Officer was a real friend.

His name was Smithson, and he had been in practice before the war. Esmé liked his kind, rugged face the moment she saw it, she liked too the curl in his hair, and the smile that always seemed to be getting born at the corners of his mouth. She liked his voice, and the quite definite way he said, 'Oh, yes,' in answer to almost every question. He was just old enough to make it easy to like him and say you liked him.

Captain Smithson's congratulations were not like the other people's congratulations, because long ago Captain Smithson had realised that Esmé's position was all wrong. That was Captain Smithson's business, because he had been a kind of mind doctor . . . the sort of thing Harley Street is never tired of denouncing. All he said when Esmé came into the duty room at the end of the ward, where he filled up the diet sheets, and did his writing was :

'Well, that should be good news to-day.'

Esmé said 'yes' quickly, and turned to go out of the room again. But at the door she stopped, and came back to Captain Smithson.

Could I consult you professionally some time?' she asked.

'Oh yes . . . it would give me great pleasure.' He added : 'You are in trouble, I think.'

He got up and shut the door.

'Please be quite frank. I shall know if you are not quite frank.'

Esmé told him her story. But she omitted all reference to Hal. She merely said that Niall and she had had misunderstandings about trifles.

Captain Smithson asked :

'And the trifles? The nature of them, I mean.'

She flushed under his calm eyes.

'Oh, he thought I was in love with somebody else.'

'Were you?'

'No.'

'I had a patient once,' Captain Smithson said, 'who lost his wife at the end of a year of marriage. After she was dead he found a memorandum book, a kind of diary, with an entry almost every day to the effect that she had rung up No. 1831 on the telephone. . . . Because she had meant a great deal to him he rang up that number too : he thought it might be one of her old friends. It wasn't. It was his own best friend, a man . . .'

'That wretched fellow when I got him had a gun in his hand. I was only just in time.'

He stopped. He wiped his brow with a big handkerchief. His kind eyes watched Esmé closely. . . .

'Jealousy,' he added, 'is the most powerful of all feelings in some people. Even death, you see . . .'

'Oh yes,' Esmé said, 'I see.' She hesitated a moment, and then added : 'But I honestly think my husband's case isn't like that, really. I . . . I don't think he cares for me at all. I have reason to believe that he cares for the first girl, the girl I took him away from. He's found out his mistake. It is just awful to be the obstacle in the way of his happiness, and I can't bear it.'

She looked at him with despair in her eyes. She repeated :

'I can't bear it.'

Captain Smithson thought a moment and then said :

'Will you take my advice and send him a telegram of congratulation ? If you are wrong . . .' he waved his hand in an expressive gesture that characterised him.

Esmé refused at first. But afterwards she promised. She went out as soon as her work was finished and sent the telegram. She wrote : 'I am so proud of you, Esmé.' Then she went home to her flat and lay down, and spent all the afternoon till dinner-time wondering if Niall would reply, or not. She managed, on the first wave of hope which Captain Smithson had inspired, to persuade herself that he would. That thought was like wine : it tingled all along her nerves. She made wonderful pictures in her mind of what she would do when she got his message. She would write to him then . . . a long, long letter, full of all the year they had been parted. She would say that if he wanted her she was ready, oh so ready, to be wanted, to be a dream girl, or a window into heaven, or anything. She would rush



to meet him. . . . She cried with her joy. Then when her tears were dried she sat down and began to write the great letter so as to have it ready when the moment came :

'MY DEAR, DEAR NIALL,'—it began—'at last you have come back to me. O Niall, if you only knew how I've longed, and waited, and hoped for this day. If you only knew what the hope of this day has meant to me when everything was dark, and I couldn't see anything in front of me except more and more darkness. My darling, I'm almost too happy and too proud to speak, to write, to think. . . . Niall, my hair is quite grown again, and I believe it's as pretty as ever . . . and . . .'

She stopped writing. A look of great fear had come into her eyes. The pen fell from her fingers, and rolled on the table with a soft, hopeless sound. . . . She jumped up and raised her hands above her head, seeming to defy hope itself. She cried :

'He won't—he won't—he won't . . . fool, fool I am. . . .'

She flung herself on the bed again, but could get no rest. The fear of his refusal, the fear of every footstep on the stairs outside, of every ring at the door-bell that should yet again cast down her desire, bit into her soul. Her punishment was more than she could bear.

This tempest of reaction left her limp and weary. But she dared not rest, because attempts to rest re-awakened the strife. Horrid shapes of her thoughts vexed her, tormented her. She tried to shut her mind and lo ! the phantoms were within her mind. Only the thought of Hal brought any comfort. Hal was the one fixed point in this whirlpool of doubt.

She examined almost coldly the life which Hal urged upon her. It would be easy, without stress or anxiety, because Hal would ask no more than any woman could give. He would ask some kindness,

some attention : he would give life-long companionship. Being married to Hal would be like camping in the nursery for ever.

And yet she wanted Hal very much, very, very much—so much that she could scarcely imagine a world in which he didn't live to come and tell her that the kettle was boiling and it was time for tea when she felt really miserable. Hal's kettle was always boiling, a real bed-bug of a kettle, she thought with a smile. Everything he said suggested a truant picnic behind not too distant ambushes. She felt the old, almost physical, longing for him, which she had felt long ago on the shore at Tourntourq . . . a longing to take him in her arms and be kind to him. Perhaps that was how a woman felt about her children. . . . And she had no children. Hal's children would have little pink faces and blue eyes. . . . They would have very pretty little mouths, like cherubs. . . .

The bell rang. She started up and ran to the door of her room, listening. Her maid was slow in answering the door, and the bell rang a second time. Why didn't they open the door ? But she dared not call or anything, in case it wasn't. . . .

There they were at last ! A boy's voice. . . . Her heart almost choked her. She jumped away from the door, and tiptoed to the dressing-table. She picked up a hand-glass and dabbed her face with powder. The door opened.

'Please, ma'am, that 's the butcher's boy.'

She said, 'Very well, Jean, tell him to . . .' She laughed suddenly, so that Jean's eyes grew big. 'Oh, I don't know. Buy what you like.'

Jean closed the door carefully.

'And so on . . . and so on,' Esmé cried to the shut door, 'and so on. And if I don't do something I'll go mad. . . . She stumbled to the bed and knelt. She prayed.

Two days of fear and hope followed, and then she

came out of her pain and distress into the cool atmosphere of despair. Niall had not replied. He would not reply. It was quite true what Hal had suggested. Niall did not care. And she was standing between him and Dulcie.

She reached this conclusion almost with relief—the relief that comes to those who know that they need expend no further effort because whatever they do catastrophe is certain. She set about planning her future deliberately. If she could not make Niall happy, at least she need not remain as a stumbling-block to his happiness. That position was too intolerable to be contemplated. It was only the hope that some day . . . but she brushed this idea out of her mind. Hal did want her; he did need her. It would be something to set Niall free and make Hal happy by the same act.

Her duty grew plainer and plainer as she looked at it.

Once only she hesitated, when she glanced up and saw Niall's photograph looking at her across the room. She ran to it, and took it and kissed it, and her tears fell on the glass and made it dim. But she put that away. She sat down and wrote :

'DEAR NIALL,—This is to say good-bye.—I am going with Hal, and you can get rid of me as soon as you like. I can't bear to think that I have spoiled your life. Perhaps now you can begin again. Hal *really needs* me, so I don't think I am to be pitied.'

She signed the letter 'Esmé.' She took the letter out and posted it herself.



## CHAPTER VI

### ‘GOOD-NIGHT : GOOD-BYE’

MRS. VERICKER took Dalgleish's letter out to the woods. She read it sitting on a high knoll, where the woods break to reveal the loch. Often they had come to this knoll together in the old days, and always she had exclaimed in new delight at the beauty of its unfolding. She touched the soft sward with her hand lightly as she sat down, as if she caressed the ground that had known him, the ground he loved. There were deeps of sorrow and pain in that caress of her hand.

She spread the letter on her knees and read :

‘MY DEAR OLIVE,—I want to write you before I go out just to repeat what I said a year ago, and what I would have said again if this hadn't happened. At our last parting I really thought that there was some hope for me, especially as the Jack Deering affair had fizzled all out, and your letters since then have encouraged that hope. . . . Only it was not to be. . . .

‘Olive, I owe you so much that I can never repay. . . . All I ever did in this show that was worth doing is you. When things were blackest, the thought that you might like me to hold on kept me going ; and when I felt that I couldn't hold on any longer you seemed to come to me with new strength . . . and that is true as I lie here. . . .

‘One thing more. Have you seen or heard of Esmé ? I am sorry, sorry about that business. Is he really writing to Dulcie and not to her ? Oh, for my sake, go to Dulcie and ask her about it. I think only Dulcie could bring them together again . . . if she would. I am giving this to Hal.

‘Good-night. Good-bye.

KENNETH.’

Mrs. Vericker stayed out in the woods all afternoon, till it was nearly dinner-time. Then she came back slowly through the sunset light and walked up to her room. She passed Hal at the front door, but Hal pretended he didn't see her. . . . Her maid brought cold water, and she bathed her face and her eyes. . . . Dim shadows seemed to move continually between her and all realities. Once she laughed, because life was so full of sorrow. She remembered Hal's quotation that had seemed empty :

Joy is a painted bladder,  
To cheat the very young ;  
I think the world is sadder  
Than ever yet was sung.

She went down to dinner, and sat beside Hal, and let him tell her about the war, and what he had seen and heard and done. Hal talked and talked . . . afterwards he couldn't remember what he had been saying. When the servants went away she demanded :

‘Now, tell me . . . everything.’

He told her, omitting only the most painful details. . . . He concluded :

‘The last word he spoke was your name. I heard it quite distinctly . . . quite distinctly.’

Mrs. Vericker said : ‘Thank you, Hal.’ She got up, and rang the bell before he could do it for her, as if she wanted to work all this business herself. When the servant came, she ordered her car.

‘I'm going to see Dulcie,’ she explained to the boy. ‘You won't mind if I leave you.’

Dulcie was alone. She was always alone now, since her father had been given a post in the War Office. She welcomed Mrs. Vericker out of the distance of her loneliness. But a single glance at Mrs. Vericker's face extinguished her welcome. She cried :

‘Olive, dear, what's wrong ? You look . . .’

‘Dagleish is killed, Dulcie . . .’

‘Oh no . . . no . . .’

Dulcie began to cry softly. Mrs. Vericker watched and envied her. If she could only cry like that. . . . At last she said :

‘He wrote me a letter before he . . . died. Hal brought it to-day. . . . I rather want you to read it. . . .’

She gave the letter to Dulcie. After a little Dulcie dried her tears, and read it. Mrs. Vericker watched her all the time. When she had finished reading, her tears were all blinked away. But her eyes quailed. She whispered :

‘No . . . no . . .’ as if she was pleading with Heaven to spare her great punishment. Mrs. Vericker sat quite still, without speaking. Suddenly Dulcie rose, and went out of the room. She came back in a few minutes with a small bundle of letters tied together. She walked with quick, short steps.

‘These are Niall’s letters,’ she said. ‘You may send them to her.’

Her voice broke ; she turned away as if a sudden pain had made her weak. Mrs. Vericker glanced at her in surprise. She had not ever seen Dulcie like this before. She took the letters and looked at one or two of them. Great wonder shone in her eyes. A kind of hurt astonishment as if cherished beliefs had been made false ; she looked at Dulcie again, with her brows furrowed. Dulcie cried suddenly :

‘Now you know what . . . what I am.’ She turned to Mrs. Vericker with eyes that did not even ask for pity : ‘If I had the courage to kill myself, I would kill myself, Olive. . . . It has been hell.’

They sat in silence : Mrs. Vericker turned over a few more of the letters. She shivered. She seemed to see the days and nights during which this girl had fought her battle and lost it . . . and fought again. She closed her eyes.



‘Perhaps it is not too late yet to make amends,’ she said gently.

‘Oh no, no . . . it would be too terrible . . . this confession. I . . . I couldn’t face it . . . her . . . how could I face her with a confession like this?’

‘Will you be able to face . . . him, if you don’t?’

Dulcie crossed the room to Mrs. Vericker, and took her hands. She cried :

‘That’s it . . . that’s what has been haunting me day and night, the thought of facing him . . . his contempt, his scorn. I was his angel, you know.’

She stopped : she looked round the room wildly as if seeking help—reassurance. Mrs. Vericker did not reply. At last she rose. She said :

‘I think that to succeed now will be a greater thing than to have succeeded earlier. I think that he would understand that.’

She went away. She left Niall’s letters on the sofa, beside Dulcie. But she took her own letter with her, thrust into the bodice of her dress.

And before her car was outside the lodge gates, Dulcie was on her knees in the big empty drawing-room, praying to God to help her to do the thing she ought to have done long ago—the thing that is the hardest task which can come to any woman out of the hands of God.

## CHAPTER VII

### ' DESERT, SIR '

ESMÉ's telegram was waiting for Niall when he came back to his own lines. The special work he had been engaged on for the last five days had proved exhausting, and he was tired and rather discouraged. He opened the envelope languidly.

He sprang up with a cry like the cry of a blind man whose sight is suddenly restored to him. He crushed the telegraph form to his lips; it tore in two in his hands. His hands shook so that he could scarcely piece it together again. Then he exclaimed again in distress. The telegram had been sent off three days ago.

His battalion was in the front line. The boom of the guns came in long crescendo, and the sharp crackling of the machine-guns, softened by distance. A sentry rattled his arms. He heard footsteps passing along the boarding at the bottom of the trench. The footsteps died away. . . .

His adjutant came in with a bundle of newspapers that had just arrived. They contained the account of the V.C. His adjutant said :

' I 'm afraid you will be rather annoyed, sir. They seem . . . rather personal.'

He looked at Niall with some misgiving, because though he admired him very much he was also a little afraid of him. Niall's moods of gloom had instilled fear of him into every man in the battalion.

To his great surprise Niall seized the papers with a shout of joy and spread them out on the table; he

read the accounts of his exploit with noisy enthusiasm, keeping up a fire of comment that made the adjutant wonder whether his natural gloom might not at last have eaten into his brain.

‘Second sight, Billy, my lad; think of that. . . . No wonder they passed it on quick. . . . Don’t want a fella’ with second sight sitting on your chest, do you? Unhealthy sort of pup, eh? to have on your trail. “Marriage in romantic circumstances” . . . hoity-toity! . . . Billy, were you married in romantic circumstances, by any chance?’

‘I’m not married, sir.’

‘No, neither you are. . . . Stupid of me, oh Billy! And you are about twenty-six, isn’t it? What would you do if I put it in orders that you were to get married to-morrow, eh?’

‘Desert, sir.’

Suddenly Niall’s face became gloomy again. He repeated the word ‘desert’ as if it conveyed an evil suggestion to his mind. He jumped up from the table and swept all the papers away with his hand.

‘When do they come to collect the letters?’ he asked sharply.

‘In about an hour.’

‘H’m . . . have a drink, won’t you?’

The adjutant went away. Niall sat down and wrote:

‘MY DREAM GIRL,—It was you who was brave, not I. Because what I didn’t dare you did . . .’

He crushed that up and flung it away across the dug-out. He took another sheet and began again. The second sheet followed the first. After that he lit his pipe and sat smoking a long time with his eyes far away, and smiles and frowns chasing themselves across his lips like breezes on a calm day. At last he woke up and wrote very quickly:

‘DEAR,—Everything began again to-night. That’s



all. I'll get leave soon. Dear, I am so tired, and so hungry, and so thirsty. . . . Dear, I can't live on dreams any more. Forgive me.—Your  
NIALL.'

He put the letter in an envelope, and addressed it to Esmé at Heath Mansions. He wrote that address boldly, as if the writing of it had been prepared ready to his hand for very long. Then he scribbled a telegram. A servant came and took the letter and the telegram away.

He knocked out the ashes of his pipe, and re-filled it slowly from a big stone jar. The telephone bell rang. He lifted the receiver, and listened while a strident voice croaked out orders and directions. He said :

'Yes, sir,' and hung up the receiver again.

Then he laughed bitterly and shrugged his shoulders. It was an order to attack the next morning. He thought that yesterday he would have welcomed that order more than anything in the world.

Esmé's letter, saying that she was going away with Hal, reached him just before he went to bed . . . after all his dispositions had been made.

Within half an hour of the opening of the attack the regimental medical officer had passed him down the communication trench 'severely wounded.' His head and his eyes were all muffled up in bandages. When they carried him away the doctor shook his head. He remarked to the sick-corporal :

'Looks like both eyes . . . God knows ! What was that he was clutching in his hand ?'

The sick-corporal did not raise his eyes from his work.

'I didn't notice, sir,' he said laconically.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE BARRIERS ARE DOWN

THE day after she wrote to Niall, Esmé telegraphed to Hal. He came the following evening. She was changing for dinner when he came, and she found him in her little drawing-room standing before the fireplace. The Flanders mud was all gone now. He looked very clean and very shiny. And the tired look had gone out of his eyes. He strode to her in his big boots, and took her hand in both of his hands.

Esmé led him to the sofa and made him sit down. She built up a wall of misty thoughts and things, and put it between them, so that he would have to sit and be good and listen to her . . . and he knew all about that misty wall (because the reflection of it was in her eyes) and respected it. She said :

‘Sonnie, you must let me say all my say first, and you mustn’t interrupt.’

Then she told him about the telegram and the letter to Niall. She added :

‘So you understand. . . . I’m using you to get Niall free. . . . I’m not the kind of girl you deserve. . . . I’m hurt and sore, and bitter and hard, and . . .’

Hal laughed at that, because what did it matter ? She cried :

‘Don’t laugh. Oh, if you knew how true it all is. But I will promise one thing. . . . I will try to make you happy, and . . . and . . .’

Her voice waned and she hung her head. She picked nervously at the velvet of the sofa cover, pulling out little hairs and dropping them on the

floor. He moved towards her, so that her hair touched his face. But he did not try to come any nearer than that. Now that the barriers were down, new barriers, stronger than the old, seemed to have taken their place. A sudden dismay, like a sickness, came into his spirit.

‘Oh, kiddie, I am so sorry for you,’ he cried.

He got up and stood by the fireplace again. The room was very still, and they could hear the sounds of the street quite distinctly, the noise of passing motor-cars and the shuffle of feet on the pavements. A child’s laughter came to them, clear, like a silver bell. Esmé patted her skirt, smoothing it over her knees. She gave a little, miserable laugh.

‘I’m not much good, am I?’ she said. . . . ‘Poor sonnie.’

She held out her hand to him. He came and knelt beside her and took her hand. He kissed it. He said :

‘Let’s go picnicking again—like we used to do at Tourntourq. We understand that sort of show, and it isn’t . . . difficult. Perhaps the other thing will come, of itself, later. . . .’

He climbed on to the sofa, and sat beside her again, bending forward with his elbows on his knees. Every now and then he glanced at her sideways round his hand. She glanced at him too, occasionally, and at last their eyes met. They both smiled. She took his hand and kissed it. She told him :

‘In a way, I suppose I’ve always wanted you . . . only I don’t quite know how. I think to be a mother to you, perhaps. When you kissed me in the wood at Tourntourq I . . . I . . . wanted you to. . . . No, please.’

She drew away from him sharply, and he desisted at once. The silence came again, full of gentleness. They could hear the grating and grinding of a cab creeping up Holly Bush Hill. Esmé listened to the



cab, and thought that when it came to the top of the hill all the grating and grinding would cease.

The cab came to the top of the hill, and stopped. After a few minutes the bell rang. They listened. There was a sound of voices in the hall, and then the door of the room opened. Dulcie Lacourt came into the room. . . .

## CHAPTER IX

### ‘ALAS ! THE LOVE OF WOMEN’

DULCIE started when she saw Hal. She seemed almost to be making up her mind to run away again. Then she gathered her courage, and advanced a few steps. She murmured an apology.

Her apology brought Esmé and Hal to their feet, Hal solemn, Esmé defiant. At least this might have been spared her. Both of them just a trifle guilty, as if the nursery had not yet forsaken them even on the threshold of disaster. Esmé said :

‘Please don’t apologise,’ in very cold tones.

‘Esmé !’ Dulcie cried, ‘I . . . I . . . have come to see you about . . .’ she hesitated. She added quickly : ‘Could I speak to you alone just for a minute ?’

She glanced at Hal. He made a move to go to the door. But Esmé held him back.

‘No, please,’ she said, ‘I would much rather you didn’t.’ She told Dulcie, ‘Anything you want to say had better be said before Hal—in the circumstances.’

That seemed to startle Dulcie out of her fear and distress. She glanced from one to the other of them with eyes grown suddenly wide with apprehension. She cried :

‘But, oh . . . surely . . .’ She came towards Esmé. Her tones grew loud, almost commanding. ‘Esmé, you haven’t done anything, anything awful, have you ?’

Esmé shrugged her shoulders. Then she laughed. She exclaimed :

'Isn't it rather hypocritical of you to look like that after . . . after what has happened? Wouldn't it be more honest just to show how glad you really are, and . . . ?'

'Esmé, you haven't! . . . you haven't! . . . What has happened? Oh, I must know.'

Dulcie's blue eyes were tragic in her dismay. Her hands twitched. Esmé said scornfully :

'Only that Hal has asked me to go away with him . . . and that I'm going away with him.' She added, with a laugh : 'Niall can get rid of me whenever he likes now, you see. I wrote and told him so two days ago. He should have got my letter by this time. Possibly there may be a letter for you from him in the post now, with the happy news. . . .'

'Oh, it is not true . . . it is not true! It can't be true!'

Dulcie wrung her hands in her consternation.

'It is true.'

'Esmé, listen to me, because you must listen. Niall doesn't care a snap of the fingers for me. Niall cares for nobody in the world but you . . . you. I swear it.' She added frantically, when she saw a sneer on Esmé's lips : 'I can prove it. These letters that I should have sent to you long ago if I hadn't been so madly jealous.'

She took the packet of letters which she had brought to Mrs. Vericker, and thrust them upon Esmé. Fear and contrition and misery harrowed her face.

'His letters to you?' said Esmé coldly. She made no movement to touch the packet.

'About you.'

'About me? . . . How awfully interesting.'

'Please . . . please, Esmé. You make it so dreadfully hard, and it is so frightfully serious. Niall wrote these letters about you so that I might help him



to get back to you. Oh, he is longing to get back to you, and I was jealous, mad. I never wrote to you . . . I never told you . . . I even . . .'

'Yes?' Esmé whispered. She was listening now, and she had moved away a step from Hal's side.

'I even told him that you had not answered my letters to you about him . . . about his letters. I tried . . . O Esmé, what have I done? . . .'

Dulcie sobbed.

Esmé stood looking straight in front of her, with her eyes full of ghost shadows. She repeated softly, so that only Hal heard her:

' . . . That you had not answered my letters to you about his letters.'

Suddenly she laughed.

'Does it much matter now?' she asked mirthlessly.

Her tone startled Dulcie out of her mood of abasement. She looked up with terrified eyes.

'What? Esmé, don't you realise that . . . that he's waiting for you . . . waiting and waiting?'

'It seems rather late now to realise anything, doesn't it?'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say.'

'But you won't . . . you can't. . . . Esmé, think what it will mean to him. Oh, how can I tell you what it will mean to him? It . . . it will kill him.'

Esmé sank down on the sofa. She covered her face with her hands.

'No, no,' she cried. 'It isn't fair . . . it isn't fair. . . . I can't bear any more.'

She reached out and took Hal's hand and held it as if this business frightened her, and she must have a companion in it.

'Please, Hal,' she whispered. 'Take me away. . . . Please take me away from it all.'

And then a strange thing happened. Suddenly

Dulcie sprang forward, and all her gentleness, and all her humility, and all her contrition fell away from her. She towered over Esmé like a fierce animal standing in defence of her cubs. She cried :

‘ Coward that you are . . . because Niall is worth all the pain you have suffered. What is all the pain that you have suffered against the fact that he needs you, that Niall needs you, that he wants you ? What is my shame against that fact, or my feelings, or my loss ? What are Hal’s wishes, or your promises to Hal against that ? Oh, I will not let you go until you have understood.’

Her eyes glowed ; her fists were clenched, as if she were ready to do battle for this cause. Esmé looked up at her with deep wonder. But when her wonder had passed she gave her shoulders the little tilt that said there was nothing worth pinning faith to in all the world. She declared :

‘ Last week, perhaps. Not to-day. . . . I should have told you that I sent Niall a telegram four days ago congratulating him on his V.C. He has not answered my telegram.’

‘ Oh no, no, he couldn’t. . . . In his last letter—see, this one—he says he is going on a special mission for five days. That would be till last night. He wouldn’t get your telegram till last night. His answer may come any minute.’

‘ He would get my letter this morning.’

Dulcie clutched her arm.

‘ You must send another telegram . . . now.’

She turned to Hal frantically :

‘ Oh, please go away and leave us for a little while.’

Hal glanced at Esmé. She shook her head. She still held his hand.

‘ Hal is not to go away,’ she said.

And just then the door opened, and Jean came in with a telegram on a salver. She handed the telegram to Esmé, and stood waiting to see if there was

any answer. Esmé got up and opened the telegram with a paper-knife. It ran :

‘Forgive me, darling. Writing.—NIALL.’

She said ‘No answer, Jean,’ very quietly. She was just going to put the telegram in the fire when Dulcie sprang to her and snatched it out of her hand. Hal cried :

‘No . . . no . . .’ angrily.

Then he jumped up with a cry of fear, and caught Esmé in his arms before she fell.



## CHAPTER X

### 'IT'S A LONG, LONG WAY TO TIPPERARY'

ESMÉ was laid on her bed when she recovered consciousness, and Hal was standing beside her. Hal had carried her into her bedroom. He had forbidden Dulcie to come into the room. She opened her eyes, and looked up and saw him.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' she whispered. 'I'm such a fool . . .'

She sat up and pushed her hair back from her eyes. She looked a little vacant, as if the tangle of her mind refused to straighten itself. Then she smiled. That was her little girl smile that she kept for Hal. . . . The smile that asked him to be her friend and companion, so that they might wander again in the dim, delicious ways of their childhood. He gave her his hand, and she bent over it. A tear fell on his hand.

'Oh, sonnie,' she whispered, 'it is all wrong, isn't it?'

'Yes, it's all wrong.'

He left her, and walked across to the window. He looked out on the lighted street with its careless passers-by. He extended a hand and grasped the sash of the window, and bowed his head over his arm. Esmé had quite wakened up now, and she watched him with eyes that were as wistful as April.

The room was very silent.

She thought that he had grown up at last and was a man. So she would have had him grow up. If only she could touch his life as a man in the way that she had touched his life as a child. The bitterness

of the gulf between being grown up and being children was unquenchable. And yet they were friends; they would be friends always. She closed her eyes and opened them again. The sobs that shook her body passed, and she could smile. She cried :

‘Have you written any more poetry, Hal? It is such a long, long time, isn’t it, since you wrote any? I almost forget how long. What was the last? . . . about “Morn with dewdrops gleaming in his hair,” and . . . and . . . I don’t know . . . Hal, sonnie, it’s a bad world, isn’t it? And you and I are poor peoples; poor, silly peoples.’

She got out of bed and went to the looking-glass. She began to pat her hair into shape. He heard her sing :

It’s a long, long way to Tipperary,  
It’s a long way to go. . . .

Her voice broke on the last word. She cried :

‘Yes . . . a long, long way to go. O Hal, isn’t there any short cut we could take, you and I, over the fields where the daisies grow and the cowslips . . . away from people, and things, and troubles, and . . . ? Do say there is a short cut, Hal, sonnie, or at least . . . heigh ho! . . .’

She rose and came towards him. She stood just behind him, and he felt her nearness to him, and the delight of her presence. Every nerve of him seemed to burn with fire. He groaned.

And then he turned and looked down into her face . . . long, earnestly, like a man who will read his doom because hope is quite dead. He said :

‘Dear, it never could have been, really, could it? And I was only mad to think that it ever could have been.’

His eyes were brave, and he did not flinch. But his voice sounded like the voice of Fate speaking across long, long distances. Esmé’s eyes fell before his

scrutiny. She did not dare to reply. He continued in his calm tones :

'I only deceived myself . . . because we were playmates, you and I. I thought love and companionship were the same thing, because with me they just happened to be the same thing. I believed you were infatuated with him, and would get over it. I was all wrong . . . wrong . . . wrong!'

He pronounced these last words with deepening conviction, but without bitterness. He had come to a truth, and the truth compelled him. That was all. He could not fight against the truth.

Esmé whispered :

'Not so wrong as I was to . . . to pretend . . .'

Suddenly she flung her arms round his neck, and hugged him.

'We aren't really growed-up, are we?' she cried. 'We are only kiddies, Hal; we're only kiddies, you and I.'

Very gently he disengaged himself. He raised her hand and kissed it. He went away to the door. She heard him close the door gently behind him. Then she heard him speaking to Dulcie, and Dulcie's clear voice answering him.

The front door opened and shut.

She stood waiting, listening, a long time. There was no sound in the flat except the ticking of the clock in the entrance hall. . . .

Dulcie came into the room. She announced that Hal had gone away.

'He's sending a wire to Niall saying that your letter was all a mistake.'

Esmé said :

'His wire will not matter now.'

She passed her hand wearily across her brow. She added :

'Niall will never believe in me again after he reads that letter.'



‘Niall,’ Dulcie cried with anguish in her voice, ‘will believe in you for ever and ever against the whole world.’

Esmé looked up. She saw that Dulcie was pale, almost to the point of sickness. Suddenly great pity for the girl filled her heart. Dulcie’s only sin was that she had loved. She held out her hands to the girl.

‘We must be friends,’ she begged, ‘for his sake . . . because we have both lost him. He must never know that we have not been friends.’

## CHAPTER XI

### CRICKET

THE sister in charge of the ward told Esmé that she might see Niall at once.

‘I’m afraid he is very ill. . . . If you would like to stay with him all night . . .?’

Esmé followed the sister into the side-room. As they entered a nurse came out from behind a high screen. A sound of moaning, a very piteous sound, made Esmé start and catch her breath.

Esmé tiptoed round the screen. The nurses went away to the door. Niall’s hand was resting by his side, uncovered. Esmé knelt down and took his hand and pressed her lips to it, smothering it. It remained limp in her grasp. Niall’s face was all covered with bandages right down to his mouth. His moaning made a gentle rhythm.

Esmé bent over him, and called his name softly again and again. The rhythm of his moaning did not vary in the smallest degree.

The nurse on duty came back and stood near the bottom of the bed. Then an army doctor came and felt Niall’s pulse. The nurse brought him a temperature chart, and he glanced at it. Esmé tried to read his expectations in his face, but his face was quite inscrutable. She followed him when he went away, and spoke to him outside the door.

‘Please tell me. . . . I would much rather know the truth at once,’ she said.

The doctor shook his head.

‘It is a very difficult case. The wound isn’t much :

a scalp wound where his helmet got bashed . . . and his eyes do not seem to have been injured.'

'His eyes !'

'Well, he's unconscious now, but when he came in he was able to speak. . . . We dressed him. He is quite blind.'

The doctor paused a moment, and then added : 'It may just be functional blindness, you know. . . . I mean shell-shock blindness. . . . They often recover. . . .'

The doctor walked slowly away down the long corridor. Esmé came back to Niall. She sat down in a chair which the nurse brought for her, and took off her hat and her gloves. Her hair made vivid contrast with the blue of her uniform, so that the nurse looked at her with curiosity. The nurse's eyes said that she was worthy of so heroic a husband.

Niall moaned incessantly for hours and hours. . . . They sat without speaking at all until the sound seemed to wear itself into Esmé's brain. The day staff of nurses went off duty, and the night nurses came to take their places. The night sister invited Esmé to have some dinner in the nurses' home, and she went with her. They had prepared a very good dinner, and Esmé tried to thank the night sister, who was an oldish woman, with sharp features, but very kind eyes.

'My dear,' the night sister said, 'he's one of our boys, isn't he . . . even if he is a colonel and a great hero ? What we can do for our boys is the very best that we can do for ourselves, isn't it ?'

The night sister said a great deal more in the same strain. She helped to wait on Esmé, and saw that she ate. After the meal was over, she said :

'You know we nurses have our instincts. I believe your husband is going to get well.'

'Oh, thank you, but . . .' Esmé turned to her



with eyes that were piteous in their apprehension. 'His blindness . . .' she cried in low tones.

'My dear, that is as God wills.'

They went back to the side-room. Niall had stopped moaning now, and the nurse in charge said that he was sleeping quite naturally. She thought that Esmé had better stay in the duty-room, because the doctor said that it was so important to keep the patient absolutely quiet. Esmé sat down in a big armchair by the duty-room fire.

The dim sounds of the hospital came to her . . . soft footfalls in long corridors, nurses' voices speaking to the orderlies who assisted them, the doctor's sharp steps as he came on his evening round . . . wide silences. The clean smell of antiseptics seemed like a kind of incense in this temple. She thought how much alike all hospitals were.

She put her hand in her pocket to get her handkerchief. She uttered an exclamation. She had put Niall's letters to Dulcie in her pocket, because she could not bear to read them, nor yet to destroy them. In the fear of these last hours she had forgotten all about them. She took them out now, and after a little while untied the ribbon with which they were bound together. She selected one at random. It was dated six months back.

Niall's old turgid style effloresced from page to page. But there were passages here and there which made her catch her breath :

'All my talk of her as my "dream girl" seems empty bombast in this world of iron and pain. I cannot think how I failed to understand the shallowness of it . . . as if love could be woven out of red-gold hair. I am weary: it is rest I want now. There is a beauty that shines like soft lamps when one is weary.'

A later passage declared :

'Esmé's courage was always greater than mine. For

she would not cast away her pearls. A mere dream girl she would not be.'

There were long discussions on the war, on the meaning of it, and on the new life that it had ushered in. He seemed to think that authority, as understood in modern industrialism, had received its death-blow :

'Merridew and his gang are gone. That was inevitable, of course. We shall have a new authority—not the authority of the taskmaster which comes from without, but the authority of the old clan which comes from within—the authority of good fellowship, of mutual self-sacrifice for a common cause, of aristocracy in the best sense. What our men mean when they speak of "cricket," and that will apply to women as well as to men, and to the relations between men and women. We will share our dreams to make our dreams come true.'

In another letter he wrote :

'Marriage seems to me a bigger and bigger thing the more I think about it, the more I look at the ruin I have made of my own marriage. I think that I took into marriage the ideas of a fellow starting a racing stable. . . . One must have this, and this, and this . . . oh justly am I punished ! That is what makes it so impossible that I should write to her. In woman we seek not Heaven but the Spirit of God.'

There was a long account of the hair-cutting incident and its sequel, and that letter was unusually bitter, so that she winced as she read it. It concluded :

'This is jealousy, but try as I will I cannot get rid of these ghouls of my thoughts. . . . Dulcie, I am haunted when these thoughts overtake me . . . and then all her sweetness is gall and wormwood on my lips.'

## CHAPTER XII

### IF

NIALL slept quietly until the small hours, and then his sleep became troubled. The night nurse told Esmé that she might sit beside him if she liked. The night nurse continued to be busy elsewhere, because Niall was talking a great deal in sleep about the intimate affairs of his life.

Esmé listened to that recital as though she was listening to a familiar voice. She listened almost without emotion, because the last days had wrung all the emotion out of her heart. Even when he called her by name, piteously, she did not flinch.

His talk was a wild tangle of ideas, old ideas and new ideas, that rushed in his brain. At one time he was back in Tourntourq, in his chief's mood, accusing her of coldness and heartlessness, and telling about the good days when his father ruled, and the fear of his father was strong through all Argyll. Then it was the war he spoke of, and she heard him commanding his men, urging them forward. His voice rang out in the stillness. But these were brief periods. The dominant idea was herself; his loss of her. He returned to that with an insistence that became almost unbearable. He seemed to be carrying on long, intimate conversations with her. Sometimes he was quite incoherent, but at other times his thoughts became clear.

'It was when you cut your hair off that I began to understand. The wonder of your hair was less than the wonder of your eyes. Why do I feel empty



when I go away from you ? There are other dreams that I have not guessed at . . . the flowers and stars are born of dust. Dear, it is you I want . . . you . . . you.'

Again he grew uneasy, and tossed miserably from side to side. He moaned :

'Cannot you see that he is only a dream boy . . . a child ? . . . Esmé, why will you leave me for nothing at all ? With your strong soul that needs a man's soul to mate with it. . . . Oh, but he has clear eyes, your boy has. You have seen your Heaven in his clear eyes.'

He laughed horribly. She rose and bent over him. She cried :

'Niall ! I am here . . . Esmé . . .'

He seemed to start at the sound of her voice. He stretched out his hand, and it touched her hair. She heard him gasp as if in great wonder. Then he stretched out both his hands above his head, and his hands implored the silence. She bent closer to him. She took his hands in her hands, and brought them to her cheeks. She called his name. . . .

But in a moment the night descended on him again. His arms fell away, limp, from her grasp. He began to talk in his piteous voice, that stumbled through abysses of darkness.

The doctors examined him in the morning when his brain was clearer. One of the doctors, a great specialist, came to see Esmé after the examination. He was a little, fat man with a kind face ; his face looked grave. He said :

'We think his blindness is not traumatic. . . . I mean, there is no actual injury to the eyes or their nerves, or the part of the brain that controls them. . . . It is what we call functional blindness . . . the effect of a great shock.'

He paused, not seeming to know how much to tell her. Esmé said :

‘I wish to know the very worst, please ; if he will ever see again, I mean.’

The doctor shook his head.

‘That is very difficult to answer. So much depends on the nature of the shock. What he had in his mind at the time of the shock.’

Esmé cried : ‘What he had in his mind at the time of the shock ? Oh, but how can that make any difference to his blindness ?’

‘My dear, it makes all the difference. Functional blindness isn’t true blindness, it is simply a mental disability to see . . . almost a disinclination to see.’

He thought a moment, and then added :

‘Perhaps I can put it like this. There are only two ways by which troubles can be overcome in this world. One is to meet them and fight them ; the other is to shut one’s eyes to them. And there are some troubles so desperate, so hopeless, that one cannot meet or fight them. One shuts one’s eyes at the first favourable opportunity. That is the underlying principle of shell-shock. It is really a paralysis of the mind occurring during moments of great stress, but predetermined by circumstances of an emotional character : fear, or grief, for example. I had a patient who lost the use of his legs in battle the day after he heard that his young wife had died suddenly. He had been wounded on two occasions before, and both times made splendid recoveries. He is still paralysed.’

Esmé bowed her head so that the doctor might not read what was in her eyes. She whispered :

‘But if the . . . the trouble should go away of itself ?’

‘Ah ! . . . those are the dramatic recoveries. . . .’

The doctor went away. Esmé returned to Niall’s room. They left her alone with him. She came to the bed and said :

‘Niall . . . I’ve come.’

She took his hand, and held it in her hand. He did not speak at all, and the bandages hid his face from her. She cried again :

‘O Niall, haven’t you got anything to say to me . . . ?’

Still he was silent. She relinquished his hand, and pressed her fingers to her brow in a gesture of great distress.

‘Niall, have pity on me.’

He moved uneasily. She thought that a sob escaped his lips. At last he asked :

‘Have they told you . . . the doctors ?’

‘Oh yes, Niall. . . .’

‘That I am blind . . . ?’

‘Yes, Niall,’ she cried passionately. ‘What does it matter, whether you are blind or not, if . . . if . . . ?’

She clung to his hand, kneeling beside him. . . . He sighed very wearily.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I suppose it doesn’t matter now.’

‘Niall . . . Niall, what do you mean ? Listen, Niall ; your wire came just in time to . . . save us. . . . Hal has gone.’

Her voice broke. He pressed his lips tightly together as if a spasm of pain had seized him. At last he said :

‘It is my own fault. . . . There was bound to be punishment for all this, was there not ? It is all my own fault.’



## CHAPTER XIII

### WRECKAGE

MRS. VERICKER wrote to Hal every week, and these letters afforded her nearly as much pleasure as they gave him. Now that she had lost Dalgleish Hal seemed to be all that was left to her of the fabric of her life ; she clung to him as every woman clings to the things she has grown up with, and which have shaped her mind and the character of her emotions. She was like a shipwrecked sailor clinging to the wreckage of his ship. That millions of other women were also clinging to their wreckage scarcely occurred to her. If it had it would not have eased her pain in the least. Woman, in contradistinction to man, is not a gregarious animal.

A week after Esmé and Niall returned to Tourn-tourq Mrs. Vericker wrote :

‘ I have just been to see poor Niall. It is terrible. He has recovered from his wound, but his eyes have such a desolate look. . . . Esmé is wonderful, simply wonderful. She never leaves him. There seems to be nothing that she does not do for him ; nothing is too much trouble. When I remember how we treated her, how we spoke of her ! Dalgleish was right . . . only he was right—and you.

‘ Oh, sonnie, I know, and I am so . . . so . . . sorry for you. . . . But I am sorry for him too, and for her. She is brave and bright, but I could read between the lines. . . . There is still a shadow between them, his blindness. A man like Niall tortures himself cruelly with his imagination. It is so easy to imagine that pity for his blindness was the reason of her coming back to him.

he is desperately proud. Everything she does for him, if he really thinks like that, must hurt to the very soul. . . . I am almost sure that he really does think like that.'

The week following she wrote :

'I have just been to call on "the Miss M'Corquodale of the Lochs" (we women have to rely on one another now, you see). She could speak of nothing but Esmé. Esmé has carried that grim stronghold with a rush, I can assure you. The poor old thing actually cried because once she had been unkind to Esmé. . . . Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor came while I was there, and they cried at each other and scolded each other all afternoon in Esmé's honour. Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor was quite merciless in the way she rubbed it in that she had known from the beginning that Esmé was a good girl. Poor Niall didn't seem to interest them nearly so much. . . .

'Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor drove me home, and talked to me about you. I can't think where she gets all her information from. Anyhow she is a very shrewd old woman, and she has seen the tragedy that is going on between Niall and Esmé just as well as I have. In fact, I think Esmé must have confided in her. She said Niall's pride was almost inconceivable, and the feeling that Esmé was being charitable to his misfortune was killing him. It is killing Esmé too, I think. I saw her yesterday. All the roses have faded out of her cheeks. . . . I tell you this, sonnie, because Esmé is very, very fond of you. That is often the way, I think, with girls who have no brothers of their own. . . . Did I mention last week that poor Dulcie has gone to live permanently in London? They are trying to sell the house here. . . .'

Her last letter to Hal afforded a further picture of the distress, and of Esmé's heroic efforts to conquer it. But that letter never reached the boy. Even before it was posted he lay with his faithful eyes wide open looking up sightlessly into long, long distances. . . . His lips smiled. A dark stain under the left breast pocket of his jacket testified to the precision of the enemy's musketry fire.

## CHAPTER XIV

### WHEN DREAMS COME TRUE

ESMÉ kept the news of Hal's death from Niall, because she guessed that it would only wound him the more deeply. He would convince himself that Hal's death was due to his fault, and this tragedy would be added to the sum of the things he owed her and could not repay . . . the things that were her charity towards him. . . .

She tried very hard not to let him suspect that anything had happened, and she forced herself to be as cheerful as usual in his company. She took him out walking on the cliffs in the morning just after the news came, and she even contrived to read to him.

Since they had come home, his love of poetry, rather a latent quality, had developed very much. It was only when she was reading Keats or Shelley to him, or when Colin was playing his pipes, that he seemed to escape from the torment of his thoughts. Strangely enough, the poem that seemed to please him most of all was 'The Witch of Atlas,' and he would recite stanzas of that at odd moments almost in the manner of a votary.

To-day, though, to Esmé's great surprise, he asked her to read him the 'Adonais,' a poem he had usually spoken of with indifference. She glanced at him sharply. His poor eyes looked out wistfully upon their darkness. His face was very weary. She began to read. . . .



He remained quite still, sitting on a rock by her side, but once she saw him clench his hands as if the words startled his composure. It was the passage :

. . . He is not dead. He doth not sleep,  
He hath awakened from the dream of life—  
'Tis we who lost in stormy visions, keep  
With phantoms an unprofitable strife.

Esmé's voice nearly broke there, but she mastered herself. She read the poem right through to the end. When she came to the last stanzas Niall's face expressed a kind of remote happiness :

. . . the breath whose might I have invoked in song  
Descends on me ; my spirit's barque is driven  
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng,  
Whose sails were never to the tempest given ;  
The massy earth and spherèd skies are riven !  
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar ;  
Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,  
The soul of Adonais like a star  
Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

He said in low tones : ' Poor fellow . . . poor Keats.'

Esmé held her breath. Did he know, then ? Was that why he had asked her to read the poem to him ? She wondered in a vague hurt way if a man really found consolation for loss in such things . . . men had so many ways of avoiding the stark issues. Or was it to test her ? She asked him plainly :

' Niall, why did you want me to read that ? '

He shook his head. ' I don't know. . . . I had a feeling that it was the thing we should read to-day.'

His sincerity was absolute. He did not know. She sighed, wondering by what power he divined these things. One of the hardest of the crosses she had to bear was this capacity of his to get inside her thoughts . . . all her thoughts, except those that directly concerned himself. The moment his own personality came into the picture he seemed to lose

his gift of knowledge . . . he became dulled, so that his non-comprehension was almost grotesque.

They went back to luncheon. After luncheon Niall lay down, and she had the house to herself. She wandered from room to room, wondering how long this ordeal of his must be continued. She put the thought of Hal out of her mind every time that it came to her, because she knew that if she once yielded to it she would break down and be unfit to carry on. . . . She dared not risk that. . . . All his future depended on her carrying on . . . all that Hal had given himself (she chose to think of it like that) to secure.

Niall's museum of relics was still just as he had left it. She had not visited the place for a long, long time, not in fact since their marriage. She looked at the funny little carved stones, with their age-old message of romance and love. How remote they all seemed from this actual present, how mute in this new world of swift pain and catastrophe. The gods departed; a strange wind was blowing across the years. She closed the doors of the gallery softly and came into the dining-room. She met the eyes of old Tourntourq looking down at her from behind his new glass.

Old Tourntourq's eyes were quite friendly. . . .

Next day Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor came to see her, and they spent a long afternoon till tea-time together. Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor was a little more feeble than she had been last year, but her personality was not a whit abated. She talked, and talked, and made Esmé laugh at all the little things of life that she had collated together to feed the furnace of her talk on occasions like this. She even made Niall laugh when he joined them at tea-time. The war might not have happened so far as Mrs. Gregor M'Gregor's small talk was concerned.

When she was going away she said to Niall in her quick, bantering tones :

‘ My dear, you are justified. I didn’t tell you before in case it made you too well pleased with yourself. Dear Jean M’Corquodale has fallen on Esmé’s neck. . . . ’

He said with a smile : ‘ I may sing my *Nunc Dimittis* then ? ’

‘ You may sing your *Te Deum*. ’

Afterwards, when she had gone and they sat alone, Niall said :

‘ Dear, do you know I fancied to-day that there was just a little more light. . . . I seemed to feel . . . better. ’

He passed his hand over his eyes.

Esmé cried : ‘ O Niall, I ’m so glad . . . I ’m so glad. ’

She came and sat beside him and took his hand in hers. She kissed his hand. But after a little he drew it away.

‘ Oh, child, ’ he whispered, ‘ why will you be so good to me ? ’ Suddenly he turned towards her, almost as if he saw her. ‘ Do you know, ’ he cried, ‘ that every time you are good to me it is like a stab in the heart ? . . . Because I have deserved nothing. ’

‘ Does love deserve, Niall ? ’ she asked gently.

He started. He seemed about to reply, and then changed his mind. His gloom descended on him. She said :

‘ Niall, is it not perhaps that you are too proud to accept anything . . . even love ? ’

She put her arms about him. She cried passionately :

‘ Oh, believe me, believe me . . . if you could only believe that I love you. ’

He asked : ‘ Do you believe that I love you ? ’

‘ My dear, I know. That is why I thank God for . . . your blindness. ’

She pronounced the last words almost fearfully.



She felt him quiver as she pronounced them. He put out his hand and grasped her arm. She thought that he was going to tell her something that had been struggling for expression a long time. But after a moment his grasp relaxed. He bowed his head. At dinner he sat listening to Colin's pipes with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Two days later the doctor told Esmé that he had real hopes of Niall.

'He seems better in every way,' he explained, 'and his eyes have not such a dead look. I think if he could recover his spirits a little further all might be well. From what I hear of these cases they improve very much when health is fully restored.'

'Only improve?' Esmé asked sorrowfully.

'Well, there have been some complete cures.'

They went out in the afternoon to the cliffs. Just as they were leaving the lodge gates they met the postman. He dismounted from his bicycle, and handed Esmé two letters. She started at the sight of the handwriting. The letters were from Hal. . . . One of them was addressed to Niall.

When they had reached their usual seat she told Niall about the letters, adding in calm tones :

'Hal was killed last week.'

'Yes . . . Colin told me yesterday. I . . . I quite understand why you didn't want to talk about it.'

She ignored the inference. She said :

'There are two letters from Hal here. One of them is addressed to you. Shall I read it to you, Niall?'

'Very well.'

She opened the envelope and read :

'DEAR TOURNTOURQ,—We go over the top to-morrow, and I have a feeling that . . . you know! In case it happens to be right I want to tell you that Esmé never cared for me—just in case all our adventures and things should have worried you—but only and always cared for you. I guessed that really the day she cut her hair off.

She didn't mind my seeing her! . . . And then when I told her I thought you were in love with Dulcie, and if she ran away with me you would be free to get married to Dulcie! Oh, it just about broke me to see her the evening she decided to do it—when your telegram didn't come she was like death. I realised then that even if we did go away it could only be as brother and sister. Not one man in thousands gets such love as you have got, not one man in thousands.'

Esmé's voice broke.

Suddenly she heard a loud cry. Niall had jumped to his feet. He seemed to stagger, shielding his eyes.

'The sky . . . the sea. . . . O Esmé, Esmé.'

She watched him as worshippers who behold a miracle. Her face was aureoled in the dim gold of the sunset. The light rushed and flamed in her hair. Only her eyes betrayed the stress of her spirit. His eyes found her. He fell on his knees at her side. She saw his soul enthroned again in his eyes. He whispered:

'Esmé, it has come. . . . Oh, at last, the dream has come . . .'

He took her hands, and Hal's letter fell from them on to her lap. . . . He drew her to his arms. . . .

Afterwards they went homewards together into the sunset. He said gently:

'You have not read your letter, dear? I am so selfish. . . . Will you read it to me?'

She broke the seal of the letter which Hal had addressed to her. There was only a single sheet of notepaper with one word written on it:

'Good-bye.'







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